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WHO G'OE'S HOME

By the same Author

A TRIAL OF LOVE

WHO GOES HOME

by
Maurice Edelman



LONDON
ALLAN WINGATE
12 *Beauchamp Place, S W.3*

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*ALL characters and incidents in this
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TO
MY SISTERS

CHAPTER ONE

Friday Night at Huberton

BEHIND THE TRANSPARENT curtains, looped and half-drawn, the windows opened wide on to the terrace, and beyond it to the huge arc of horizon, mauve with dusk and clumps of rhododendrons, and irradiated with saffron from a still invisible moon. In the distance the silhouettes of pylons seemed no longer an intrusion on the tranquillity of Huberton's estate. They conformed with the stillness of the Hampshire plain; they were proper in the airless evening.

Lord Huberton was showing his Bouchers and Baudouins to a group of respectful guests before dinner.

"This, of course," he said, pointing to a tiny gouache in a gold frame over a marquetry consolette, "is quite the best thing I have. It's so difficult for one to know exactly how Baudouin liberated *guazze* from the impasted manner of the Italian water-colour painters . . . but there it is." He looked lovingly at "L'Enlèvement Nocturne," with the fading glow of firelight on the silks of its rococo furniture.

"It's my favourite too," said Lady Pembury, the pretty editress of a fashion magazine. "It's like a reflection of this room. Rather like looking through a peep-hole into another room of the same period."

"How interesting!" said Lord Huberton. "How very interesting!"

He interrupted his soliloquy on his pictures to turn his light-blue eyes on Lady Pembury, and from her to the satin-wood side-tables with their tapering legs and fluted supports, reproducing the style of the furniture in the painting.

"Pateræ, husks, rams' heads and urns. How right you are, Madeleine. But look!" he ordered his guests.

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Their heads assembled round the little picture as they peered at the decorations so exactly repeating those in the room from which they stared.

"It is a peep-hole," he said. "*An œil-de-bœuf*. I adore peep-holes!"

"You have the best collection of Baudouins in this country," said M. de Sauvigny of the French Embassy. "Family heirlooms . . ."

"In a sense . . ." said Huberton, and went on to describe the next picture, a vast canvas set in the middle of the wall called "*Les Forges de Vulcain*." "You see the combination of mother-of-pearl and chrysolite . . ."

"I like Gerald's heirlooms," said Spencer to Hilda Fursby, a Principal at the Treasury.

She was ill-at-ease, wondering why Huberton had invited her. She didn't drink cocktails, and apart from her host she only knew Spencer, a Lobby Correspondent whom she had sometimes seen in the House when she had brought briefs for her Minister.

"They're descended from a long succession of bankruptcies," Spencer went on.

"How do you mean?" asked Miss Fursby, now on familiar ground.

"Well," said Spencer, "you don't think Gerald's a member of the ancient British aristocracy, do you? His father was a share-pusher, who specialised in buying derelict companies, dressing them up and selling them. He bought his title from old man Vaughan—Geraint Vaughan—in the same way as he bought the pictures, cheap at a sale. Didn't you know?"

Miss Fursby shook her ear-rings eagerly. "I knew Geraint Vaughan did well out of titles when he was Prime Minister," she said.

"Quite," said Spencer. "But you didn't know that he kept up social relations with his customers afterwards. You'd have thought it's the kind of transaction that next morning you don't acknowledge in the street."

"But why does Huberton ask his son here?"

"It's a form of self torture. John Vaughan's his hair shirt. He reminds him of his origins—that even Huberton comes from dust."

Spencer rested his head against the gilt back of the settee, and his thick dark hair curled over it.

"Still, don't blame John for his father's trading skill," he continued. "After all, if it hadn't been for that, he wouldn't have had a happy retirement so young. And if he had to cut everyone his father honoured, he wouldn't have many friends."

Vaughan, leaning against the fireplace, was drinking sherry and caressing a heavy alabaster scroll. His wife was drinking a dry Martini, her face alert and smiling, though neither of them spoke to each other. Spencer folded his arms and, stretching himself, crossed his ankles.

"You see how it all ends," he said. "There's nothing to it. There they are, the romantic war-time figures, Helen and John Vaughan, their conversation completely exhausted five or six years ago. If he were to express a new idea she'd consider it an affectation. They haven't a thing to say to each other. But they're stuck. They're stuck in the romantic legend which was the justification for her . . . He began to splutter with laughter. "She married him as an opportunity to get into high politics. He married her as an opportunity for getting out."

"Don't be silly," said Miss Fursby.

"Oh, it's true," said Spencer. "Helen's an ambitious woman. When she married John, she thought he had a brilliant Parliamentary career in front of him."

"But what happened?"

"He gave up his seat. His constituents didn't approve of co-respondents. And there's Helen—stuck. He watches her like a warder."

"It is rather funny," said Miss Fursby after a second's thought, speaking in her clipped, contralto voice. "I must tell Pam about it when I get home. I really must tell Pam."

"What the devil are we waiting for?" asked Spencer.

"I'm really hungry. If we don't have dinner soon, I'll eat an *objet d'art*."

"We're waiting for the right honourable Gentleman and his wife," said Miss Fursby.

Spencer tightened the knot of his tie.

"I do resent Michael Erskine's assumption," he said, "that he can always arrive late, apologise, and that everyone will then smile and like it."

"But that's exactly what happens," said Miss Fursby. "The Minister for Economic Relations is an important man. He wouldn't do it if it didn't come off."

"It doesn't come off with me. I don't like it."

"Medor!" said Lord Huberton, his face gleaming with pleasure. He was most content at week-ends, when the rooms of Huberton resounded with his guests, and the Palladian terraces were disorderly. Limping slightly on his stick, he went towards the hall and called again, "Medor!" A slouchy Boxer dog came sagging in, his flesh in folds, and looked resentfully at the guests. He paused at the settee, and Miss Fursby stretched out her hand to stroke him. Medor growled, a low warning growl.

"Please don't touch him," Huberton said sharply. Then he added more gently, "He's very beautiful, isn't he?"

"He's quite lovely," said Jane Erskine, entering at that moment with her husband.

She stood for a few seconds, her head a little below Erskine's shoulder, tugging at her black evening dress so that it might cover the thin strap of her brassière. With its faint straggle of light brown hair drifting from a centre parting, her head looked as though, whatever mode she attempted, it would always dispose itself into a pleasing inelegance, just as her mouth translated itself, when she smiled and showed her even, white teeth, into a feature of personal grace, though too large for formal beauty. By her side Erskine, restrained, at ease, carefully dressed, examined the room with the assurance of a leading actor who pauses on the stage, word-perfect and confident of his popularity, till his audience is intimidated into silence.

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The others, with the exception of Spencer, who went on talking loudly, hesitated in their conversation, and waited for their host to greet his principal guests. When Huberton had done so and was walking with them towards the fireplace, Spencer abandoned Miss Fursby and intercepted Erskine.

"Hello, sir," he said. "Good trip?"

"Yes," said Erskine.

"Satisfied with the Agreement?"

Erskine turned to Huberton and said, "Medor's grown since I was here last," and moved on slowly, leaving Spencer standing indeterminate in the centre of the room.

Jane went to pat the dog, but Medor growled again loudly, his black chaps quivering.

"He doesn't like being touched," said Huberton.

"I'm so sorry, Gerald," said Jane, hurt. "I'll have a drink if I can't stroke Medor."

The others laughed.

"Medor," said Huberton unsmilingly, "is my dearest friend—my friend and companion." He took a cocktail biscuit and dropped it into Medor's mouth.

"He is a charming dog," said Lady Pembury.

"You too are a nation of dog-lovers," said M. de Saucigny.

Hargreaves, a young State Department official, tall and thin with short-cropped hair, said, "I like his flews."

"What's a flew?" asked Helen Vaughan.

"Oh, these," said Hargreaves. "Well, I don't know how to explain. You see that ridge under his upper lip? That's the cingulum. The flews are the pendulous parts."

He had been a zoologist at Princeton before transferring to the Diplomatic Service, and had retained his interest in the physiology of fauna.

"What a lovely animal!" said Helen.

"He is very beautiful," said Miss Fursby, anxious not to be excluded from the benefit of approbation. "Pam and I have a Cairn. I mean, we had one before we took our new flat."

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Memor growled distantly, and the slaver which the cocktail biscuit had provoked on his muzzle slowly spilled over and dribbled on to the pale green carpet.

At dinner Lord Huberton was not displeased with the progress of the evening. The black jackets of the men, the white arms of the women, and above all his own tweed suit, which he wore as a social unguent to Hargreaves, who had forgotten to bring evening clothes, all filled him with a sense of propriety. His twenty-one guests round the oval mahogany table were producing the satisfactory and steady drone and murmur which gratifies a host, as the groan-sigh of an aircraft engine in steady flight contents a pilot. Everyone appeared to be talking or listening. There were even one or two rather loud conversations across the table, a practice which Huberton normally disliked as being contrary to the urbanity which he fostered at his week-ends. But tonight he welcomed it. The candles threw sharp dagger lights on to the glasses and the salad bowl in which he was mixing a dressing. Behind his guests the *boiseries* on the wall, which he secretly detested but ostentatiously admired since he had commissioned them, were smudged in shadow.

"But Gerald," Jane Erskine on his right interrupted his thought. "Why on earth did you put Michael so close to Tony Spencer? You know they can't stand each other. They scarcely speak."

"That's exactly why I did it, Jane. It's the art of juxtaposition. Besides, I wanted Helen to have an opportunity of talking. Poor girl, it's her first morsel of conversation this evening. John's rather inhibited as a conversationalist."

"And Hilda Fursby next to M. de Saucigny? He's a well-known woman-chaser."

"Yes. I thought they'd have something in common."

"H'm," said Jane. "Now, what about Madeleine and that young American—what's his name?"

"Hargreaves. He's perfectly delicious. I had an idea he might like to try to pump Madeleine about politics."

"But Madeleine doesn't know a thing about politics."

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"That's what's so amusing. He'll think she's bluffing."

At the other end of the table, Michael Erskine was explaining to de Saucigny, Helen and the others within the limit of earshot, all politely inclined towards him, the meaning of political conscience. Two of three of his listeners had paused deferentially in their eating.

"Its essence, of course, is to make sure that the Party survives, particularly when it's in power."

"That is something I admire very much in the British," said de Saucigny. "You have, so to speak, an empirical conscience. It is the servant, not the master, of your convenience."

"Oh, come," said Erskine. "I wouldn't go as far as that. We allow ourselves from time to time—even in the Party—the luxury of an absolute conscience."

"As I see it, sir," said Hargreaves, a shape beyond the flutter of the candles, "you've got a privileged conscience if you're a pacifist."

"Or if you don't believe in public-drinking after ten-thirty," added de Saucigny. "Pacifists and anti-drinkers—they are the only people you allow the luxury of a conscience. But I see them from my perch on the Commons, up in the Diplomats' Gallery; I see them going into the Lobbies in support of the Defence Votes—your pacifist teetotalers."

"Not mine," said Erskine, holding up his glass of Beaujolais so that it gleamed like a red pool. "I don't think they exist in our Party. The Opposition has stereotyped its conscience into a tolerance of pacifism and teetotalism. We have our own stereotypes. We learn them at school."

"That's true," said de Saucigny. "But what's done, as you call it, is merely a national fashion. Here in England, for example, a financial scandal in public matters means political death."

"And quite right too," said Erskine.

"Whereas in France, it means, so to speak, a week in bed. On the other hand . . ." De Saucigny hesitated for a second while assessing Erskine's likely reaction. "We French apply standards of private morality to our international dealings."

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You British would call that sentimental. Your chief difficulty—if I may be permitted to say so . . .”

“Please do,” said Erskine. “Dissections are fascinating. You usually keep your scalpels for writing despatches.”

“I am very indiscreet,” said de Saucigny, warmed by Erskine’s amiability. “At any rate, I was saying that you British have a difficulty. Your word ‘immorality’ means sex—nothing else. So that if Foreign Secretary A cheats and lies to Foreign Secretary B—well, that’s not immoral. Oh, so! It’s merely diplomacy.”

De Saucigny sat back in his chair and smoothed his receding black hair.

“The first duty of a statesman,” said Erskine, “is to devote himself to his country’s self interest. International relations are incapable of having the same sort of moral basis as our private relations.”

“I like that very much,” said Madeleine Pembury. “It’s the sort of philosophy I always wanted to have. You know—‘I’m important, so I can do what I like.’ Do you believe in that too?” she asked Hargreaves.

“Well, not exactly,” said Hargreaves. “Most of us are still carnivores, as our ancestors were years ago. But we don’t eat each other, or even eat our meat raw. I don’t agree with the Minister. I think we’re groping for some sort of international morality.”

Madeleine sighed as he began to outline for her some of the United Nations bodies on which he had served as a representative of the State Department.

Helen was absorbed in a private conversation with Erskine.

“But they kill you with their hospitality,” she said. “I know how it was when I was over there with John. You, as a Minister . . .”

“Oh, it was tolerable,” said Erskine. “In Washington we used to work on the Agreement early in the morning. The afternoons were hot. It was almost impossible to do anything properly. And then there’d be the parties in the evening. They were quite incredible. Not only the official hospitality

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—the private entertainment was endless. And sometimes infinitely boring.”

“You must be so glad it’s all over,” said Helen. “There’s been an awful lot of feeling about it over here.”

Erskine leaned towards her and said in a mock confidential voice, “To tell you the truth, it’s just begun. I’ve got to get the Bill through the House, and I can assure you it’s much easier getting the Americans to give us machine tools than it is to make the Opposition accept them with good grace.”

“Morgan’s so terribly anti-American. . . .”

“As Leader of the Opposition, he’s rabid.”

“Would you agree?” said de Saucigny to Erskine.

“I beg your pardon,” he replied.

De Saucigny drew back his head a fraction of an inch in affront. “I was saying to Miss Fursby . . .”

“Oh, about Glen Affric,” said Erskine, who had retained in his memory some straggling words of his neighbour’s conversation. “One of the most exquisite places in Scotland. I do advise you to go there.”

“I was saying to Miss Fursby that I’d just been there.”

“Yes,” said Erskine. “Yes.” And the two men laughed, Erskine’s embarrassment an apology for his inattention.

He turned back to Helen, and lightly brushed a trailing hair from her bare shoulder. “Is everything well?” he asked.

“Oh, of course,” she answered brightly.

“And John?”

“Very well.”

“I’m glad.”

They looked up together and caught Vaughan’s eyes staring at them sombrely and suspiciously.

“Isn’t that so, Mr. Vaughan?” de Saucigny asked.

Vaughan turned his gaze from his wife, who had begun to choose a peach for Erskine from the pannier of fruit.

“What’s that?” he said. “Oh, yes. Yes.”

De Saucigny raised his eyebrows and decided to concentrate on Miss Fursby, despite her flat chest.

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Vaughan moved his chair in order to avoid Erskine's direct glance. In doing so he found himself facing Spencer, who looked at him with amusement before continuing his banter with Lavinia Peterhouse, a young student from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. As she rehearsed on him a small role which she had lately acquired, he paddled the rose petals in his finger bowl.

The next morning Helen, Madeleine, Hargreaves and Erskine rose early to play tennis. The lawns leading down to the courts were deserted, except for a white peacock that broke into a savage cry at their approach. Underfoot the grass was still slippery with dew, and Helen took Erskine's arm as they walked. Lord Huberton, propped up in his bed by the window, took up his field-glasses and watched them, brilliant against the green grass, moving towards the courts, their voices murmuring in echoes across the terraces and repeated from the beech woods. The summer air blew into his bedroom with a freshness that reminded him of his youth. By his bedside were the photographs of three of his friends who had been killed in the First World War. He looked at their severe faces, young and unconcerned with death, and remembered them as they had been: Francis, Philip and Richard, radiant with living.

"Never again!" he thought to himself. Never, never, never would they meet again. The thought of "never" made him want to cry, and he pushed his face into the pillow. He was the survivor, and all the others were dead.

"Never again, Medor," he said to the Boxer, crouched at the bottom of the bed. "Never, never, never again."

He removed one leg from under the covers, and put the bare sole of his foot on the folds of the dog's flesh, rolling it backwards and forwards in time to the melancholy rhythm of his thoughts.

He took up his field-glasses again, and began to watch the players, who had now reached the court. Erskine was helping Helen off with her scarlet coat. Hargreaves was serving a few balls for practice. Huberton moved his glasses up the

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American's long legs to his shorts, his sweater, his lean face and his stiff hair. Then he put them down abruptly.

Erskine and Helen were playing against Madeleine and Hargreaves. Hargreaves, tall and gangling, served first, a hard, fast service that skipped high from the pressed gravel of the court. Huberton could hear Helen's voice squeak with apprehension as she poked ineffectively, trying to return the ball. He again focused his glasses on the court, and watched Erskine receiving. His expression was taut, his brow furrowed, his lips pursed, his forearm muscles tensely moving. Hargreaves served again, a crashing service that hit the court and bounded to the right. It was out, and Erskine crouched waiting for the next ball. This time it came hard at waist level. Erskine took it in a powerful fore-arm drive to Hargreaves' back-hand. Hargreaves, taken off balance, lobbed his return, and the ball soared over Erskine's head to Helen on the baseline. She waited for it to bounce, and prodded it gently into the net. Huberton heard her cry of self-reprobaton, and watched Erskine approach her with a consoling smile.

"Room twelve," he said into his bedside telephone. He heard a voice reply. "John? This is Gerald. Do come and have breakfast in my room . . . yes, now . . . all right . . . rolls and coffee . . . straight away."

A few minutes later Vaughan came into his room in a blue silk dressing-gown, and sat on the bed by the window. He was still unshaven, and he stroked the rime on his chin.

After they had greeted each other, Huberton said, "I hear you're going back into politics, John."

"Good God, who told you that?"

"Somebody or other. Don't you want to?"

"No," said Vaughan. "There's only one thing I can ever be in politics, and that's my father's son. It's a hereditary curse. I don't want it. And besides, I don't like politics."

The butler placed the breakfast tray on a table by the bed, and Vaughan poured out the coffee.

"I'll tell you frankly Gerald. When I was in the House

all I had was my father's name . . . and that's all there was to it."

"I hear there's to be a bye-election in your father's old seat."

"Don't talk to me about Cwr'tibrau."

"Why don't you have a shot at it?"

"I've told you," Vaughan said reluctantly, "I'm out of politics—and I've grown up."

"Yes," said Huberton. "Yes."

He was examining Vaughan's face, and thinking that he seemed like a well-tended garden in a droughty August, preserved and stale. Vaughan. The dingy posterity of a famous name. They chatted for a few minutes, listening to the voices of the tennis player that came from across the lawns.

"You can see the Blackstone Hills today," said Huberton, looking out of the window.

"Yes," said Vaughan indifferently. "And the Moreland Ridge."

"Yes. It's remarkable how clearly you can see them through the glasses . . ."

"Zeiss?"

"No, Hummelzwerger."

The laughter from the court was bright and satisfied. Huberton handed Vaughan the glasses, and he raised them slowly to the landscape. At first he saw a vast green-brown thicket, which gradually he identified as a cluster of leaves in a tree a hundred yards away.

"What extraordinary magnification!" he said. "It's almost confusing."

"Try the greenhouses."

Vaughan traversed the far places of the horizon with a wondering smile, till at last he paused, the glasses focused on the tennis court. Huberton watched him from the bed. Vaughan saw his wife's face as she served. Concentrated and puckered, rather sweaty with effort. She served, and the four players ran together, a confusion of white. The ball came back, and Erskine and Helen clashed their rackets as they

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simultaneously tried to hit it. They stood laughing helplessly in the centre of the court, and Vaughan could see the whiteness of their teeth and the darkness of their gullets, laughing. He moved the field-glasses, and saw that Erskine had his arm around Helen's shoulder, with his fingers digging into her upper arm, clenching and unclenching, moving along the delicate golden hairs of her flesh. Helen was bending forward and beating the court with her racket. The top button of her blouse was undone, and he could see his wife's breast quivering with laughter as Erskine leaned over her, her face half covered by her fair hair.

"Well, what do you think of it, John?" asked Huberton, lying back on the pillows.

"I think I'll get dressed," Vaughan said, pale and unhappy.

When he had left the room, Huberton rolled himself contentedly in the bedclothes, and began to laugh to himself at the recollection of Vaughan's face, quietly at first, and then louder and louder, till at last he was gasping and sobbing.

The dog looked at him enquiringly, and licked his drooping head twice.

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

ONCE THEY HAD left the area of light thrown from the tall windows on to the steps and the west terrace, Helen took Spencer's arm and led him into the darkness of the Italian garden. The thin moon lit the pathway between the statues of satyrs and nymphs, but Spencer walked cautiously, feeling with his foot at the end of each step of the descending walk.

"Do hurry," Helen begged him, tugging his arm. Through the open windows they could hear the voice of Scott-Palmer, Erskine's Parliamentary Private Secretary.

"I wanted to talk about important things, Germany, Communism and all that. But there was some fatuous woman there who could only talk about fashion . . ."

His voice trailed away in the distance, replaced by the bubbling of water from a triton's mouth.

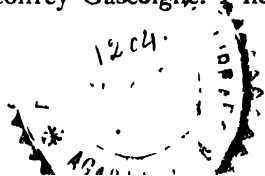
"I left John in the library," said Helen. "He wanted to walk with me to the village."

She held Spencer's arm pressed tightly against her as she urged him away from the conversation and laughter of the guests who had been sitting on the terrace after dinner. The sounds died with the lights in the windows, till all that was left was the muttering of the fountains, the stir of lime trees overhanging the walk and their footfalls, softly crushing the thyme and peppermint between the flagstones.

"He'll be disappointed," said Spencer.

"Who?"

"Scott-Palmer. He wanted to be Erskine's Under-Secretary. The job's gone to Geoffrey Gascoigne. I heard it from London."



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"Well, let it go. I don't care about Scott-Palmer or anyone. Darling, you were so unkind to me. The whole day. Why have you been so beastly?"

"Beastly!" Spencer asked, disengaging his arm and lighting a cigarette. "In what way?" He put one hand in his pocket and walked a little ahead of her to hold back the branches that obstructed the path.

"You know quite well," she said. "You and your girl friend."

"Girl friend?"

"The RADA girl. Lavinia Peterhouse. You know perfectly well. You were lying next to her on the bank where I was playing tennis. And you were holding her hand. It was horrid. I couldn't concentrate. Michael got absolutely . . ."

"Michael!" Spencer pushed away a sprig of eglantine. "You've been making up to the man the whole week-end." He was striding ahead along a narrow path that ran round the lake.

"Tony," she called after him. "Don't be so absurd. You know what I think of Michael Erskine. It's really too absurd. Darling!" The last word was a cry because Spencer had begun to run.

His resentment at Erskine's discriminating indifference towards him, coupled with his playfulness towards Helen, had blurred Spencer's pleasures throughout the day. It had condemned him to be silent among the groups that formed and re-formed around Erskine who, the deeper Spencer's feeling of affront and exclusion, had become the more careless and at ease. Now Spencer, transferring his anger from Erskine to Helen, felt released from his restraints.

"Tony!" Helen cried, louder still.

He ran on steadily, listening to her voice calling him, sometimes close, sometimes receding into the darkness. He heard her fall once, then waited for her to rise before running on again. Near the Temple of Persephone, a stucco building with a classical pediment facing the house on the far side of the lake, Spencer halted and waited. She came running up to him, her breath rattling in her throat.

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"Oh, darling, darling," she said. "You're so unkind to me. You make me do such abasing things."

Her hair lay over her face, soggy with her tears. Casually and distantly he took her small chin in his hand, and smoothed her hair behind her ears.

"What things?" he asked.

"Anything. You know I do anything to humiliate myself to be near you. I wait for you, and run after you like—like a madwoman. For two years . . . You weren't always like this. You were kind and sweet and gentle. Why do you always want to hurt me?"

She felt for his mouth in the darkness, and finding it, pulled his head down to hers and opened his lips, first with her fingers and then with her mouth. After a few moments he pushed her away from him.

"But you prefer Erskine . . ." he began.

"Oh, darling, darling," she said again. He could see her eyes glittering in the light that came from the water.

"You do," he said.

"I wouldn't care," she said, seeking for some ultimate assurance, "I wouldn't care if I saw him drowning in the lake . . . with little bubbles coming up . . . tiny little bubbles . . . if he as much as harmed a hair of your head."

She smiled at him timidly, and Spencer, triumphant and contented, kissed her cheek and put his arm around her waist. Together they walked towards the Temple.

"Have you seen my wife anywhere?" Vaughan asked Jane.

She was knitting in the drawing-room, talking idly to Miss Fursby. Some of the men were grouped at the other end of the room listening to Scott-Palmer.

"She was here a minute ago," said Miss Fursby. "I've just been reading McQueen's book on Cabinet Government. He mentions your father quite a lot."

"Yes," said Vaughan stiffly. "Did you see where Helen went?"

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"I really don't know," said Jane, knitting steadily. "Michael's gone for a walk to the village."

"Bit late isn't it?" said Vaughan.

"Oh, they've only gone for some air. I expect Helen's gone with Michael."

Vaughan went into the hall and stood gazing through the windows into the night. A few seconds later he returned and began to read an old copy of *Punch*.

"Gerald went too," said Jane.

"Oh, yes," Vaughan replied, his mouth trembling in a smile. "He's a great noctambulist. I don't think he ever goes to bed before two or three."

"But how extraordinary!"

"Well, it isn't really. He gets a frightful pain in his back. It's a war wound. He's always in pain. You know, Jane, he's very courageous. He never talks about his troubles. I think he'd rather drop dead than disturb his guests."

"That's what's so nice about him," said Jane. "I hear you may be going into politics again, John."

"That old story again! It's only an idea of a few other people. They've been trying to rumour me into it."

"But why not? You did so well when you were in the House. You were terribly young."

Vaughan looked straight into her face. "Thank you, Jane, that's very kind of you. But you know it wasn't really so. Whatever I did, I did under my father's wing. Or in the shadow of his reputation. I hated it—always. The only time I felt a real person was when Helen came along."

"You're very lucky—having Helen. I admire her so much. She's always so cheerful, and she always looks so pretty." She held up the pullover she was knitting. "Do you like it? It's for Robert. He's only twelve, but they grow so quickly when they're away at school."

"Charming," said Vaughan. "Charming. I wonder if I should go down to meet them. Where did you say they went?"

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"To the village, I believe," said Jane.
Vaughan walked hurriedly away.

The moon had now set, and all around them was an utter darkness, except for a glimmer of light from the stars, and the distant windows of Huberton. From where they were lying they could see the rushes of the lake, big in their perspective as trees, unmoving in the warm summer night, and protecting them like a barrier. Spencer passed his hand slowly over her long naked back, and felt it chilled with sweat. Then he drew the tips of his fingers lightly over her vertebræ towards the nape of her neck.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

She answered lazily, and kissed his ear.

"We must go," he said. "It's getting late."

"I don't want to go," she said, and took his hand in hers and laid it on her breast. Underneath him, her face was in shadow, a faint luminosity compared with the blackness of the Temple. Spencer felt suddenly uneasy.

"Let's go," he said.

"Not yet. In ten minutes, darling. Not yet . . ." Her voice was awake. "Oh, Tony, if only you knew what it was like . . . the infinite, excruciating boredom. He simply won't leave me alone nowadays. He follows me everywhere, so that sometimes I think I'll go quite mad. If only he'd do something."

Spencer had heard her analysis of Vaughan before, and was reluctant to hear it again. Besides, the night dew was beginning to seep into the garden cushions on which they were lying. He tried to divert her.

"Have you enjoyed this week-end?" he asked.

"Seeing you—yes. This has been heaven. The rest of it—well, Gerald has a genius for composing ill-assorted parties. I think he does it on purpose. But he's terribly sweet."

"No, not sweet. There isn't a single word for him. As a matter of fact he has only two hobbies, and one of them is making mischief."

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"No, darling. He's nicer than that. And you really like him very much."

"Helen, we must go. It's nearly half-past eleven."

"Let's come here tomorrow night," she said.

"All right."

"And will you hold me—like this—tomorrow again?"

"Yes."

"Just like this?"

"Yes."

"And kiss me like this?"

She twined her arms around his neck, till his whole weight lay on her, and a surge of pleasure rose in him again. The muscles of her thighs tautened, and he raised his head so that he could reach her open mouth. As he did so, staring wide-eyed into the penumbra around her, her face glowed into light as if the headlights of a car had suddenly illuminated it. Her features were lit for a second, her eyes tightly closed, a frown distorting her forehead, lips drawn back in an agony of pleasure, and Spencer looked up in nightmarish horror at a torch that flashed and went out. He heard a cough, and a shape went past him, followed by the scraping of a wicker table as another shape lurched past growling.

"T'ony!" Helen screamed through Spencer's smothering hand.

"It's all right, darling," he said quickly. "It's all right."

"Who was it? Who was it?" She was whimpering and clinging to him.

He stroked her hair, and put his hand on her wildly thumping heart.

"It's all right, darling. It's all right," he kept repeating. His own heart was beating in hard, regular thuds.

He struck a match, and saw Helen struggling to put the halter of her black evening dress over her shoulders. The wicker furniture of the Temple was all carefully arranged. The cushions, except for those they had lain on, were uncrumpled. With his guttering match, Spencer walked to the arm-chair in the far corner of the alcove. It was warm.

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where someone had been sitting on it. As he touched it with his hand, the match went out.

"Oh, Tony, Tony!" he heard Helen call in a half scream.

"I'm here, darling," he said, groping his way towards her.

"Oh, Tony," she said. "I'm so frightened. I love you so much."

"Don't be afraid," he answered, and kissed her with tenderness for the first time that evening. She continued to tremble and whimper in his arms. "Now listen," he said roughly. "Stop it, and don't be absurd. I don't know who it was. It might have been Huberton."

"Oh, God, how beastly," she said.

"Never mind about that. We'll go back together. You'll go in through the hall door, and say you got lost. I'll go up to my bedroom through the back way. D'you see? And anything else . . . well, let's see what happens."

He had recovered his self-assurance by now.

"Anyhow," he added as they walked carefully along the narrow path by the lake, "I think it's rather fun."

"Well," said Helen. She clung tightly to his arm. "I don't really mind. You see, I love you very much."

He plucked two golden marigolds from a border that overhung the lake. When she stretched out her hand, he pressed the flowers into the opening of her dress, and laughed.

"Has anyone seen my wife?" said Vaughan, bursting into the room from the hall. He had walked two miles to the village and back, and his face was glistening with sweat.

"John?" a voice said lazily from behind the settee.

"Really, Helen," said Vaughan angrily. He was exhausted and wanted to sit down, but all the places were taken. He stood in the centre of the room, feeling uncomfortable and foolish. "Really, Helen," he said again. "You might have told me you were going out. I've been hunting for you everywhere."

"Good exercise, my boy," said Erskine banteringly from his arm-chair.

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Vaughan strode across the room and stood in front of him with his face paling.

"Look here, Erskine," he said, "You might have had the courtesy to let me know when you——"

"John!" said Helen sharply. The general conversation halted for a second, then resumed itself faster and louder.

Erskine rose. "I'm so sorry, John," he said, putting his arm on Vaughan's. Vaughan drew himself away. "I've been looking at papers in my room since dinner. You've really got hold of the wrong end of the stick."

Huberton, who in the far corner of the room had appeared to ignore their conversation, joined them.

"I hope you won't be angry with me, John. I took your wife for a walk in the woods. I always take my friends' wives for walks in the woods."

Everyone laughed, Vaughan too. Huberton patted Helen's hair, and, without the others seeing, removed from it a leaf and a thread of cushion material.

"But we promise you, John, we won't deceive you again. Will we, Helen?"

Once more everyone laughed.

"Beer or whisky, John?" Huberton went around the room like a salesman calling his wares. "Beer or whisky? Beer or whisky?"

Spencer came into the room carrying a whisky-and-soda, and joined Helen and Jane, who were sitting together on the settee.

"I've just found a wonderful book in the library," he said. "*A Waterless Spring*. Pellegrino. Have you read it, Mrs. Erskine?"

"I haven't read anything that's been published in the last five years," Jane answered. "Honestly, you've no idea how little time a Minister's wife has for herself."

Helen rose, leaving Spencer and Jane together, and stood holding Vaughan's arm as he talked to Hargreaves.

"But you're so very well informed on politics," Spencer said to Jane. "You really ought to be in Parliament yourself, or at least a lobby correspondent."

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Jane drank her whisky-and-soda, and said, "I don't know anything about politics. All I know about it I get from Spencer's Sunday paper. I'm a floating voter actually. I mean, I vote for my husband anywhere and always."

"Very loyal of you, Mrs. Erskine. Admirable."

"You don't like my husband. Why? It seems such—such bad taste on your part."

"Oh, no. I like him well enough. He doesn't like me. He doesn't like some of the stuff my lord and master makes me write."

"But do you have to do it?"

"Does your husband have to obey his Whips? The paper has a policy. And I conform. But I can tell you—whatever your husband thinks of me—we're pro him for the next few weeks at least, though a little, just a little anxious about the American Agreement. I have to write a Profile of him for next Sunday. All about him and his family, you and Robert and the baby and the dogs. I'll expect you to tell me all the secrets."

They were talking gaily together, and Jane with her shortsighted eyes failed to see Erskine's frown from the other side of the room.

"I ought to sleep well after this whisky," she said.

"Yes," said Spencer. "Have another, a small one."

He poured a measure of whisky from the decanter into her glass.

"Bed, Jane?" Erskine called out.

"In a minute, darling," she replied. "Soon as I've finished this. You don't like my husband, do you?" she asked Spencer again, teasingly.

"I do," he said in the same tone. "Cross my heart I do."

"All right," she said. "Now what are you going to say about him in your Profile? I warn you, I'll never speak to you again if you say anything unkind."

"How did you happen to meet him, Mrs. Erskine?" Spencer asked.

"Oh, I was terribly lucky. Elizabeth Bannister introduced us."

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"That must have been some time ago. The P.M.'s wife's been dead nearly fifteen years."

"Yes, I've known Michael for ages. You see, we—my family—knew the Bannisters very well. My father taught Greek at Oxford. I was the youngest in the family. And Michael's father—Sir Alexander Erskine—had treated Elizabeth for a long time for bronchitis."

"I thought he was a heart specialist."

Oh, no. He did chests. He was a wonderful man. And after he died the Bannisters were very good to Michael. Elizabeth introduced me to him at a tea party at Number Ten. Soon afterwards Michael came into the House on a bye-election at Merchison. He's sat for it ever since. It's a very safe seat. Now you tell me what you're going to say about him."

Spencer lay back against the brocade settee, crossed his legs and looked at the painted ceiling. Jane examined his handsome, casual face and decided that she liked him.

"Well," he said. "I'll begin by mentioning his background. Harrow, Trinity and the Bar. Why didn't he ever take silk?"

"He didn't want to. He gave up law very quickly, almost as soon as he got into the House. He was one of the youngest junior Ministers in this century. The P.M. picked him out almost at once. And he's been very good to him ever since."

Spencer nodded his head with admiring interest.

"So, you see, he really has had no time for anything but politics since he's been in the House."

"He likes the political life?"

"He's devoted to it. It's his whole life. I think he'd simply shrivel up and die if he left it. He's been in it most of his adult life, except when he was away at the war. But after he was wounded, he came straight back."

"You must be tremendously proud of him."

"Desperately. You know Michael was first in the Popularity Poll that the *News* ran?"

"Indeed I do. I'm told the Foreign Secretary wasn't too pleased."

"No," said Jane.

"Do you help him with his constituency work?"

"A bit. I like doing it when Michael's travelling about. He has to do a lot of it, you know."

"I know." Spencer poured her another drink from the decanter. "Forgive this cross-examination, but I don't often have an opportunity like this. Do you find it frightfully strenuous being a Cabinet Minister's wife and looking after a family?"

"Not really. Robert's away at school, and the baby, Sarah—well, I have someone who helps me look after her and does the flat. It isn't awfully easy living on a Minister's salary with all the expense and no other means. And I like to travel with Michael whenever I can. They don't pay for wives, either."

"You weren't with him in America?"

"No, I wish I had been."

"He did a lot of hard work on the Anglo-American Agreement?"

"Frightfully hard work. But don't ask me for details." Jane passed her finger along the rim of her glass to make it squeak. "Can you do that?" she asked. "I learnt it when I was a tiny little girl."

She was content, and wanted to hear music as an accompaniment to her agreeable vertigo. Spencer could see Erskine trying to detach himself from Miss Fursby, who was addressing him earnestly.

"Is there anything special?" he asked quickly. "Anything special that I can say about your husband?"

"When are you doing the Profile?"

"It's for Sunday week."

She hesitated a moment. Then she said, "All right. Can you keep a secret for a week? A tremendous secret?"

"Of course I can. You can trust me, Mrs. Erskine. You know you can."

"Well . . ." She leaned forward confidentially, and he leaned towards her. She paused, and then went on, "Broughton—he's going."

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"Oh," said Spencer, straightening himself, disappointed.
"I knew that."

"But that isn't the secret," Jane continued triumphantly
"The secret is . . ." She spoke slowly and deliberately
"Michael's going to replace him."

"Erskine—Michael—Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

"Yes."

"That is a tremendous secret," said Spencer slowly
"You haven't told anyone else? Journalists or anyone like
that?"

"But of course not. You have promised, haven't you?"
She was beginning to get worried.

"You can have absolute faith in me," said Spencer
"When will it be official?"

"Oh, there are lots of things to be tidied up. The Prime
Minister asked Michael not to talk about it till Broughton
has made a statement."

"Thank you, Mrs. Erskine. I am very honoured by your
trust." He looked from Erskine to Scott-Palmer, and from
them to Huberton. "Good-night," he said.

"Good-night, Tony," Huberton called out.

Without speaking, Erskine moved half a pace forward to
let Spencer pass.

At eleven-thirty on Sunday morning Lord Huberton was
crouching at his window, observing his guests through his
field-glasses. Scott-Palmer, who had sent him a note saying
that he had been recalled to London on urgent business, was
trying to start his car, which was drawn up at the bottom of
the steps. Huberton lowered his glasses and took up the
paper.

"He's angry, Medor," he said to the Boxer. "It was
generally expected that Mr. Charles Scott-Palmer, M.P., the
Rt. Hon. Michael Erskine's Parliamentary Private Secretary
would succeed to the Under-Secretaryship. The Prime
Minister's choice of Mr. Geoffrey Gascoigne, M.P.
suggests that he is concerned with introducing new men
with industrial experience into his administration." He read

the extract from the political correspondent's column, and took up his glasses again. Having failed with the self-starter, Scott-Palmer was trying to crank the car, but apart from the rattle of the handle, no sound came from it.

"The battery's run down," Huberton said aloud. He rang through to the chauffeur's house and said, "Williams, come over at once and help Mr. Scott-Palmer to leave in decent quiet. Thank you . . . thank you."

By the elm-trees, Erskine was walking with Jane, and Huberton could see the rapid, angry gestures of his hands. He saw her turn her face imploringly to her husband, and as she did so, the lenses filled with the mottled red and white of her tear-strewn face. Huberton shrugged his shoulders, and looked again at the headline in the newspaper. "Government Changes: Broughton Goes: Erskine Chancellor?"

"Well, Medor," he said. "Mr. Spencer had a busy evening."

The telephone rang. He raised it and heard de Saucigny's voice.

"Hilda?"

"No," said Huberton conclusively. "You have the wrong number. Miss Fursby's extension is twenty-six."

He lay back on the bed and laughed quietly to himself. Then he picked up the telephone and spoke to the butler.

"Give Mr. Spencer my compliments——"

"Mr. Spencer left at eight this morning, sir."

"No doubt, no doubt."

Huberton threw the Sunday papers delightedly on to the floor. "Wonderful week-end!" he called out. "Up, Medor!"

The dog leapt on to the bed, and Huberton and Medor wrestled together for several minutes, rolling over and over with joyful growls and squeals, till the man got bored and kicked the dog away.

CHAPTER THREE

A Prospective Candidate

THE POLICEMAN LED Vaughan past the group of civil servants in the North Corridor at the end of the Chamber, and said, "Does it seem strange, sir?"

Two Members of Parliament, talking earnestly to each other, touched Vaughan with a glance and hurried on.

"I haven't been here since I gave up my seat. Not for nine years," said Vaughan. "There's a lot of new people."

"It's on the right," said the policeman.

"Thank you," said Vaughan. "Thank you very much."

He had no need of guidance. Outside the oak door he read the card in the slot. "Leader of the Opposition—Rt. Hon. George Morgan, M.P." He raised his hand and tapped quietly, as if he was afraid that Morgan might hear. Then challenging the silence, he beat loudly with his fist. The door, unlatched, yielded, and Vaughan pushed it farther with his fingertips till it opened on the empty room. To the right was a coat-hanger with Morgan's hat and raincoat. Vaughan avoided it. Morgan's numen hung invested in its intimidating quietude. He felt uneasy. The table with its two telephones, the pipe, the brown leather settee, the diamond-glass of the windows, the racks of Parliamentary Debates, were a necromancy, calling up the years when his father, now long dead, had been Leader of the Opposition. The framed drawings on the wall gave face and form to the remembered awes of his boyhood. The chair behind the table, with its traces of kapok bursting through the worn leather, seemed the same as he had known all his life. He

came near it, touched its arms, and drew away quickly as he saw himself reflected in the scrolled looking-glass that faced the table.

He had seen his sloop—he was over six foot in height—and his father's voice had thundered from the past, "Stand up, man." He straightened himself, then slouched deliberately, loosening his woollen tie and examining his face in the glass. Under his firm chin the skin was beginning to sag in a dried fold. At the edge of his eyes were two pouches of shadow. Vaughan liked his face, preserved it with care, and regularly inspected it for signs of decline from the forms of its youth. After combing his fair hair carefully, he raised his chin, looking from the side of his eye at his profile, and said, "Yes," aloud.

Satisfied, he began to examine more closely the pictures on the wall. The young men in the old-fashioned morning coats and beards stared back at him with the gaiety of caricatures. Their fobs dangled elegantly from their trouser-pockets. Their black silk hats were tilted jauntily on the backs of their heads. Some had silver-topped canes. Two or three were in hunting pink, their riding crops tucked against their breeches. "Lord Ivor Martin, M.P., Edgar Ponsonby Esq., M.P., the Rt. Hon. Adalbert Mulhouse-Smith, M.P." Vaughan edged his way along the wall reading the titles of the portraits. "Charles Talbot Esq., M.P." He remembered him vaguely, the Prime Minister thirty-six or seven years before. A serious man with a high wing collar, very tall and thin, always crossing and uncrossing his legs as he spoke, and usually twisting a piece of paper, a letter or an Order Paper, into spills. Did he remember that? Vaughan wasn't sure. Perhaps his father had told him about Talbot. His mind was stuffed with second-hand memories, interspersed with the anecdotes that his father used to tell him when they lived together at Pelling, after his mother, a faint figure of his earliest childhood, had died. Those were the years of his father's political glory, when the new Leader of the new Opposition, the tribune of the masses, stood, a famous and guiding figure, against a background of what John Vaughan

could only remember as the misty commotions and dim anxieties of war and civil strife.

Among the portraits a drawing by Spy of his father when he was still a young back-bencher hung sullenly. Vaughan felt an old respect clutch at him, such as he had often felt in the past when he stood in the presence of his father, particularly in the later years, after his father had become Prime Minister, and his aloofness, even to his friends, was his strength and the origin of the resentments which finally led to his defeat. Vaughan stood looking at the heavy handsome face, with its smouldering expression, the striking but unfashionable moustache, the homespun suit and the boots. "Father—first phase," he said to himself. His chief recollection of his father in his retirement was of a white-haired, erect old man, the right honourable Geraint Vaughan, O.M., with a carefully-trimmed moustache, conservative and distinguished in his dress, attending with pleasure to his ceremonial duties as an elder of his State. That was the unread epilogue. It was Geraint Vaughan, the orator, the people's champion who remained the legend.

"Sorry, boy," he heard Morgan say from behind him. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

He turned and shook hands with Morgan, who pointed to one of the leather armchairs at the side of the mahogany table where he had seated himself.

"I've been battling," Morgan said, brushing back a thick strand of grey hair that fell over his forehead. "I've been battling. It's a question of independence, nothing else." He spoke with a rising inflection, a cadence at the cæsura of the sentence followed by an abrupt ascent to its end.

Vaughan put his finger-tips together. "I'm a bit out of things . . . I haven't been following. . . ."

"When your father was Leader of the Opposition, John, all he had to do was to save the country from the Government. We've got to save it from our allies as well."

He ended with a little chuckle, and ran his fingers through his hair again. Vaughan smiled obligingly.

"There is only one problem for Britain in the second half

of this century," said Morgan. "It's the problem of independence. Now look at the dilemma . . ." He was in full harangue.

Vaughan followed the stabbing finger as if the dilemma might suddenly take physical shape and become visible, cowering under Morgan's attack.

"If the Russians win, we're destroyed. We need American help. But to barter independence for help—that's suicidal mania, nothing else."

He got up and walked towards the window looking out at New Palace Yard, with its long lines of untidily parked cars, towards the wrought-iron gates where the evening procession of Members arriving and leaving had already begun.

"If the American Bill goes through," Morgan said, talking to the window, "we can say goodbye to the supremacy of Parliament. It's finished, finished." He turned and struck with his fist at a bound volume of Statutes, his neck swelling with anger.

"Imagine the situation," he went on. "A column of Americans arrives at Cwmbran. They evict three hundred of the lads. And their women. And their children. Evict? No. Fair play. There's compensation. They settle down with the squalid paraphernalia of their washing-machine civilisation. Their G.I.s make themselves comfortable with their whisky standard of pay. And then, on top of all this, Erskine wants them to have the right to be judged by their own courts, the right to have rights over and above our own rights in our own country. He wants to start them doing to us what the Egyptians stopped us doing to them over thirty years ago. It's the most monstrous proposal that any Government has ever brought before the House."

Morgan paused and reflected. His face, which had become dark red with emphasis, became composed again, and his voice, which had shrilled with rage, now quietened into a normal conversational tone.

"You know," he said, "I regard Michael Erskine as by far the most dangerous man in the Government. And now the Old Man's going to give him the Treasury. I've begged our fellows not to underrate him."

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"I was at Trinity with him," said Vaughan. "He was enormously able, even then. We still see him occasionally. He was at Huberton the other day."

"His special ability," said Morgan, "is to have the ear of the Old Man and hold it. I consider that Erskine, in the year he's been Minister of Economic Co-operation, has done more to tie Britain to the United States than the whole Government's done in the last three years. And he gets away with it with his velvet breeches charm. You remember him when you were in the House?"

"We were never very close. I was only in the House six months."

"But you remember him speaking—never losing his temper, always ready to toss a smile at our fellows. He's a dangerous chap is Erskine. He gets himself liked. Mind you, he'd better be careful with that casual manner of his. One of these days, if he doesn't watch out, he's going to trip himself up and fall flat on his face." Morgan dismissed Erskine from the conversation. "How's the wife?" he asked.

"Oh, flourishing," said Vaughan, relieved that he could begin to talk on a familiar subject. "Helen is always well."

"If your father were alive," said Morgan, returning to his theme, "there'd be bonfires in the Welsh valleys tonight. I remember him at the time of the Pontypridd judgment leading the miners' protest march. I was only a lad, and he was a great man, a Member of Parliament. But we marched through the Rhondda, and our numbers grew until the whole country understood that if those miners . . ." Morgan interrupted himself and laughed. "That was before the days of constitutional respectability. You're the second generation lad, the generation of Eton——"

"Harrow."

"And Oxford."

"Cambridge."

"Well, it doesn't matter one way or another. You're the inheritor of a revolution gelded by tradition; so is the Government, in a sense. But what they don't realise is that their Bill isn't merely a sell-out of the social revolution of

the last twenty years. It's a sell-out of the whole British tradition. That's the paradox of the whole affair," Morgan continued. "Those fellows," he waved derisively towards the Chamber, "they think they're the repositories of the British way of life. They're not. They're empty begging-bowls waiting for charity, the American dole. Well, anyway, John, how are you? How many years is it since you gave this up?"

"Nine," said Vaughan, looking away from Morgan's direct glance. He never felt at ease with him, though he had known Morgan throughout his early life as a household attendant, his father's familiar; Parliamentary Private Secretary, the youngest Minister in his Government, and, on his father's death, Leader of the Party almost as a reversionary right, both in Opposition and during the restless ten months in office before his minority Government was defeated. In front of Morgan, Vaughan still felt something of the subdued immaturity from which he had always suffered in his father's presence.

"I'm not in the least bit sorry," he added defiantly, as if he expected Morgan to challenge him.

"That's all right, boy," said Morgan, sitting comfortably in his chair. "I'm not saying you are. It's we who are sorry. You were a great loss when you went."

"Well, thank you, George. But there was nothing else I could do."

"Mind you, I always thought you exaggerated. It was a pimple, but you called it a cancer."

"I don't think so," said Vaughan. "You may think it an act of weakness. I don't know. At any rate my choice was an easy one. It was a question of staying with Helen or staying in the House. It's quite a familiar thing. Happens two or three times in every Parliament. A Member gets mixed up in a divorce, or the papers are filed. And all the old women and the old men are after him. They don't like co-respondents or divorces."

Morgan laughed. "It's the jealousy of the impotent. But these things are changing, John. The political mortality rate

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from divorce has been steadily falling since you left the House. Look at the Front Bench survivors!"

"That's just it," said Vaughan. "You can come into politics as a divorcer, a divorcee or, as an adulterer. But you mustn't divorce or be divorced while you're the people's tribune. High mindedness and divorce don't mix."

"Well, you were wrong, boy," said Morgan, taking out a volume of Parliamentary reports from his bookshelf and pushing it back without looking at it. "You gave up your seat at the drop of a hat. Your Executive said, 'Oh, dear!' and you collapsed. The old ladies sneezed, and you caught pneumonia. Everyone knew Helen's husband was a washout. When you married her, you made her as happy as well as an honest woman. You had an excellent career in front of you. Then you threw it all up. It was daft. You gave it up, for what?"

"Well, politicians don't understand this. But I gave it up for our private happiness. The very thing you were talking about a moment ago. After all, politicians give up their private life for their public happiness."

"And now, nine years later? Are you happy?"

"Yes."

"And Helen?"

"I hope so."

"Are you working?"

"There's the estate. . . ."

"A day a week."

"And father's biography."

"You've been on that six years, and you've written three chapters."

"How do you know all this?" Vaughan asked angrily.

Morgan laughed loudly with his head thrown back, his strong neck throbbing.

"I'd like to know," Vaughan insisted. "Really? . . ." His words dribbled away, and he sat silent and indignant.

"Erskine told me," Morgan said calmly.

"Erskine?" Vaughan said, looking up quickly. "It isn't a matter I'd discuss with him."

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"Oh, it wasn't you who told him. It was Helen."

"I didn't know. . . ."

Morgan was observing Vaughan's face with smiling eyes. It was thin and soft, handsome but indeterminate, tired but restless. "She said she didn't know how to keep you amused nowadays. You haven't much to do."

Vaughan prepared to rise.

"Just a minute, John," said Morgan, leaning across the table and putting his hand on his arm. "I haven't asked you here for chit-chat."

Vaughan looked back at him, staring distastefully at the veins on his cheeks, and the blue scars on his nose and brow.

"I asked you here because I want you to stand for Cwmbrau. . . . There's going to be a bye-election."

"I'm sorry," said Vaughan, standing and stretching out his hand to Morgan. Morgan took up a pen instead. "I'm sorry," Vaughan repeated. "It was very decent of you to think of it, George. I know you're offering it to me for the best of reasons." He regretted his impulse of anger and revulsion. "I know you want to do me a kindness."

Morgan, who had started to draw squares and black them in, threw his pen down and said grimly, "Sit down, lad. I haven't finished. Where are your manners?" He added in a shout, "Sit down!" Vaughan took his seat again.

"I was suggesting," Morgan went on in a quieter voice, "that you stand not for your sake nor for mine. There's more to it than that. Cwmbrau is a key bye-election. Why? I'll tell you. When your father was defeated by Evans, there it was, as much a miracle as when the sun stood still for Joshua. But the sun's been standing still ever since."

"Evans was a good candidate."

"Well, he was. But he isn't now. They don't take nomination papers where Evans is lying. Cwmbrau is going to be a key bye-election for one reason only. It's going to be fought on the question of the American Bill. That's all. It's going to mean more than today's debate." Morgan put both hands on the table, and leaned forward till his face was again thrusting into Vaughan's.

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"It's going to be the debate of the people. They're going to say whether they want high wages as base-constructors for the Americans—or their liberties. They're going to say whether they want to be hewers of wood and drawers of water in their own mountains. You see? That's the point, boy, not whether I want to help you in your career. To tell you the truth, I don't give a damn for your career. But, you know, I sometimes think of your dad. Oh, yes, I think of him a lot. We were good friends. I miss him every day of my life."

Morgan's eyes dimmed with tears.

"I sometimes wonder what he'd think if he were alive today. I can see him in the park at Cwmbrau on the mound, speaking to the people like an evangelist, and showing them the way. I want you to stand, John, because the name of Vaughan is still a great memory at Cwmbrau. With that name we could win that seat with a vast majority, and change the whole situation overnight."

"But you know I've finished with the House."

"The House is full of men who've finished with the House, and come back. Men who've been beaten, and tried time after time till they've been returned."

"Well, they didn't leave voluntarily."

"Did you?"

"In a sense, yes. I'm not a politician. I've seen too much of it—the façade and the pretence of the whole business—its false matiness, the back-slapping, the unreality of the whole business. It's all a sort of theatre, stuffed with unreality."

"What about its realities? You didn't see them because you were always trailing behind, first of all at the coat-tails of your father, and then behind the skirts of Helen."

"Look here, George . . ."

"What right have you got to talk about the hypocrisy of politics? What cause have you ever fought for, except yourself? Take a look at yourself in that mirror. You're a middle-aged man, fossilised in a simulacrum of youth. In four or five years, at this rate, you'll be a figure of fun. Don't you want to try to save yourself? Don't you want to be saved?"

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Again Morgan pointed his accusing finger at Vaughan. Again Vaughan lowered his eyes and then his head, while Morgan's voice, raised in declamation, flowed on.

"What sort of life do you think you're giving Helen? I'll tell you. A dismal sequence of colourless days. She's a woman who wants bugles and banners,"

"You know nothing about Helen."

"I knew Helen, and what I don't know I can guess. Now listen, boy!" Morgan walked around the table and put his arm on Vaughan's shoulder. "Listen. You're forty-three. You've got a chance to help in something important for your own future and for the country's future. Give it a chance. Believe me, I'm your friend. If I weren't," he added, his bile rising again, "I'd tell you to go to hell. But I'm not saying that. Your father and you—you will be fighting this election together."

"But how can I?" asked Vaughan, looking up with impatience and hope. "I can't just go to Cwmbrau and say, 'Take me!' What about the Party at Cwmbrau? Don't they have any say in the matter?"

"Yes," said Morgan firmly. "They have trust in me. They say what I say." He took Vaughan's arm, and walked with him towards the door. "Don't tell me 'yes' or 'no.' Not now. Think it over, John. Talk to Helen. She's a fine woman. She'll understand. Ask her what would make her happiest; and I'll stand by that."

He clapped Vaughan on the shoulder, shook his hand, and watched him for a few seconds as he walked down the dim corridor.

Back in his room, Morgan looked fixedly at the portrait of Geraint Vaughan, at the determined black moustache and the out-thrust chin.

"Well," he said in a loud and angry voice. "There's your son for you."

At eleven o'clock that night, Vaughan sat in his flat at Willon Place with the newspaper cuttings about his father and the red files of biographical material spread out in front

of him. For the last ten minutes he had been distracted from his work by a bust of Ceres which he had bought in a Cambridge antique shop, and which faced him, endlessly calm, on its black plinth. After studying the fillets of the goddess's hair, yellow with the light from the lamp on his table, he began to scrape away with a paper knife the dealer's label that said, "Bust of Ceres. A.D. 20." The wood was worm-eaten, and every now and again his knife sank into it. When he had removed the label, he sat himself again in front of the paper which had the heading, "Chapter IV. The Bradenham Speech," and an opening sentence:

"If the work of Geraint Vaughan can only be comprehended by an assessment of his whole life, his life's work can be summarised by the purpose, the substance and the consequences of his Bradenham Speech."

Vaughan took up his fountain pen again, and turned his eyes from the distraction of Ceres to the cover of a *New Yorker* that lay on the arm-chair. It showed an American family picnicking in the country in a stockade of large motor-cars. Vaughan couldn't see the point of the illustration, and spread it over his paper.

"Why the devil," he thought to himself, while he was examining the *New Yorker*, and looking out of the corner of his eye at his father's obituary notice in *The Times*, now dingy with age, "why the devil should Morgan want to rout me out?" He had walked home with his cheeks flushed, as if he had been a reprimanded child. "And why bring Helen into it?" They had managed without Morgan for nine years. And Erskine too. But what had angered him most of all was Morgan's jeer about the biography of his father. It was true that he had been writing it for years. And it was true that he had only reached Chapter IV. But there was an enormous amount of research to be done. He hadn't done it all. That was true as well. All the same, Morgan wasn't to know that. Vaughan turned over the pages of the *New Yorker*, flung it aside and began to think of his next sentence.

"By declaring himself against any kind of reformist alliance which might have delayed the radical realignment"

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—(he didn't like "realignment," and began to look for synonyms; "re-orientation"—exotic; "transformation"—jingly. He settled for "changes.") "... changes which the Government resisted, he was able to rally the support of the weavers and spinners, while alienating them from their former champions, who shared the odium of the Coalition, though none of its benefits." He wrote the sentence down, relished it, and leaned back in his chair

He had been on holiday from school when his father began his famous Carlisle to Southampton campaign. Never had he felt so happy in his life, breakfasting with Miss Miller and laughing—laughing. That was something almost unknown at Pelling. When his father was at home meals were silent, apart from occasional random questions about school thrown at him from an ambush of newspapers, letters and White Papers, which he had scarcely begun to answer before his father was already absorbed in a new leading article, or moved to an abrupt shout of indignation at some report of a speech by himself or an opponent. His father could make great audiences tumble with laughter, but he never joked at home. Between him and his son there was no intimacy; only an agonising awkwardness on John Vaughan's part that lay in never knowing what to say either to interest or entertain, and on his father's part in his inability to express his affection, or to break down the barrier of their mutual contempt.

Miss Miller was different. She came to them as a house-keeper-governess after John's mother died, and with her steady cheerfulness brightened the gloomy rooms of the Victorian country house. Vaughan had twice seen secretaries with their hands shaking in uncontrollable apprehension at his father's scowl. It seemed curious to him that grown men should feel frightened like himself. But Miss Miller was never frightened. She laughed and called his father, "You old bear," when he got really angry. And instead of getting angrier, he would smile, and everyone would smile and feel better.

The day his father spoke at Bradenham they picnicked

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in the woods and he fished. Then in the evening they dined alone, and he sat in his father's place, wishing his father would never stop electioneering and never come back. At bedtime she said, "Big boys of ten don't cry." But he did cry, ardently, and she comforted him in her bed.

The following day his father returned, and Miss Miller went down the steps to greet him, and they went to his room smiling. A little later the maid came for John. "You're wanted in your father's room," she said. "You'll cop it." He went to the study, his legs trembling with terror so much that he could hardly walk. The room was empty, and for a few moments he looked at the signed photographs of statesmen on the grand piano that sprawled across one corner.

"John," said his father, half-closing the door behind him.

"Yes, father."

"Miss Miller says you've behaved . . . impertinently."

"Me, father?" His bewilderment was sincere and complete.

His father had picked up a long black ruler from his desk, and was turning it over between his fingers.

"Yes. How dare you?"

"Dare what? What?"

"How dare you follow her into her bedroom?"

With a sudden gesture of rage, his father struck at John's legs. The ruler missed his legs, but hit his left thigh a resonant clack.

John didn't wait for his father to take fresh aim. He ran through the half-open door, weeping with mortification and hatred for himself, Miss Miller, his father and the whole hostile human race. For hours he lay sobbing in the paddock, and didn't come in to lunch. Miss Miller found him there, and all he could say to her was, "Go away!" But she wept too, and said it wasn't her fault, that it was only a joke. And they went back together when his father had gone out.

The next day at breakfast, his father and Miss Miller were both smiling, their good humour restored. John sat in silence, the weal on his leg burning.

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"The Bradenham Speech must be accounted a masterpiece of persuasion," Vaughan wrote, piercing the paper with his pen, "since by the force of its intellectual logic, mingled with emotional insight—Geraint Vaughan was above all a humanitarian—he achieved a mass conversion which had never been equalled since the days of the early preachers."

"Well," said Helen, taking off her gloves as she came into the room. "How's the book?"

"Hello, dearest," he answered, rising to greet her.

She turned her mouth away from him, and he kissed her clumsily on the side of her short upper-lip, beneath the delicate tilt of her nose.

"I've written three long sentences," he said.

"Excellent."

She threw herself into the arm-chair by his desk, and taking off her green straw hat, shook out her hair and kicked the shoes from her feet. "I'm terribly tired," she said.

Vaughan frowned on the dark strand that curved behind her ear among her smooth, fair hair.

"When you lie there like that," he said, "you look no more than eighteen."

"Instead of nearly twice that."

His eyes passed over her relaxed body, the slight thickening of her waist, her thin hands feeling for the clasp of her cigarette-case, and she looked up at him.

"What are you staring at?" she asked.

"You," he said. "Your eyes are beautiful and red. You leave me too much. Where've you been? I waited for you at dinner."

"Poor John," she said, lying back with her eyes closed. "Don't you remember, I told you I was going to have dinner at Edna's after the committee meeting?"

"I don't remember," he said. "Anyhow, look at the time. It's quarter to twelve."

"Don't be an inquisitor, John, and put your hand on my forehead. I've got a headache."

He sat on the arm of her chair with his hand enclosing her brow, and she asked, "What've you been doing?" She

groped for conversation. "Oh, did you see Morgan? What did he want?"

She twisted round and asked him the questions eagerly.

Vaughan shrugged his shoulders. "He asked me to stand for Cwmbrau."

"John!" She put her arms round him and held him tightly in her excitement. Her eyes had become bright with pleasure. "I'm so terribly glad. It's wonderful. Wonderful! I've always wanted you to get back into the House."

"He told me you were unhappy."

She stopped smiling, and pushed him slightly away.

"How dare he discuss me. What do you mean by discussing me with him?"

"I didn't. He mentioned you. He told me Erskine had been talking to him."

"Michael? What's he got to do with it? Oh, John, you're not going to be silly about Michael Erskine. You know that was centuries ago. We've gone into it so often. Really, I am too tired."

She began to undo the clasp of her bracelet, while Vaughan, trapped in a tangle of obscure annoyance, sorted the pages of his manuscript.

"Don't be silly, John," she said. "Come and help me with this."

She took off the green jacket of her suit, and held out her slender arm for him to remove her bracelet. The diamond links made little red furrows on her wrist as he pressed the catch.

"I'm sorry if I'm hurting."

"It doesn't hurt."

The clasp suddenly opened, and the bracelet fell to the ground. He knelt to pick it up, and when he handed it to her she smiled in his face, and he kissed her on the mouth. She kissed him back, her eyes wide open.

"It's wonderful about Cwmbrau," she said. "You will stand, John, won't you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to. It's too much trouble. I hate politics. How many reasons do you want?"

She took her jacket, slipped her shoes on again and walked slowly to the door, a swinging, unhurried, languid walk.

"John," she said.

"Yes?"

"You must write to Morgan tonight. You must accept. I want you to."

Without answering, Vaughan took up his pen again, and tried to reread the words he had written. But the *New Yorker* caught his eyes. He pushed his manuscript away, and began to read a short story.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Parliamentary Day

FAR AWAY BEYOND the semi-opaque windows of the Chamber that lay cocooned by the drawn blinds in a biscuit light, the tapping of a chisel on stone in the courtyard made the silence of the crowding Members more intense, and formed an accompaniment to the hard emphasis of Erskine's voice as he leaned over the despatch box and across the broad table separating the Parties towards Morgan, who sat on the Opposition Front Bench, his arms folded, his eyes half-closed, waiting for the triumph to end. Behind Erskine, during his opening speech on the Second Reading of the Anglo-American (Machine Tool) Bill, the cheers of the back-benchers had steadily risen in confidence and enthusiasm—all the more so as the newspapers had forecast that the Government would have difficulty in justifying the compulsory transfer of population and the juridical concessions in the Bill.

"There's trouble too for the Government," an evening paper had written editorially, "For why? Because the Little Englanders look one way only. For years they neglected the Empire. Now they tie themselves in knots with American apron strings. But watch out for the mischief-makers, Mr. Morgan and his fellows . . ."

And *The Times* had written, "The vigour with which the Government has addressed itself to the solution of the machine tool problem, now the most important of those confronting British industry, should not mask from us the apathy, on the one side, and the resentment, on the other with which the British public entertains the prospect of a

general emigration of the native population from the Cwmbrau valley, and the introduction of certain extra-territorial rights, limited though they may be, for our overseas allies. But those who seek to drive a wedge of doubt . . . Mr. Morgan and his colleagues . . .”

But Erskine, after nearly half an hour of speaking, knew that the crisis of debate was over. Spilling into the gangways, where they sat hugging their knees, standing attentively beyond the Bar by the Serjeant-at-Arm's chair, or sitting in clusters on the steps of the Speaker's chair, the Government supporters were exultant, the Opposition depressed.

“Can there be any doubt,” Erskine asked, “that great advantage will flow to us from this Agreement? Will anyone suggest that this addition to our machine tool resources will not prove of enduring benefit to the nation's industry? And is it not above all an act of unequalled generosity on the part of the United States Administration, that it has been willing to sponsor an arrangement which, by enhancing the productive capacity of British industry, may well have increased the difficulties of American exporters in world markets? Why, sir,” he turned to the Speaker, who sat in the shadow of his dark green chair, “it is praiseworthy for nations as for individuals to give of their surplus. But how much more noble is it when a nation or an individual gives at the expense of its own interest? That, indeed, is what our American allies have done. Yet—let us acknowledge this act—there are men of unworthy mind and spirit,” he turned to face Morgan, and the voices behind him rose in an angry and hostile diapason towards the Opposition, “who do not shrink, even in this critical time, when what is at stake is no less than our lives and liberties—they do not shrink from impugning the motives and sully the purposes of our friends. Sir, if they were to reserve some small part of their malice and spleen for our ill-wishers—and they do exist in the world—their emotions would be better spent.”

He quietened the hear-hears with a calming hand.

“Mark you,” he went on, “It is perhaps fortunate for Anglo-American relations that so much of the spite which

otherwise the Opposition would aim at our allies is exhausted—for the time being at any rate—in their fraternal relations with each other."

In the uproar of cheers from the Government side and angry shouts from the Opposition that followed, a Member rose in the third row behind Morgan, and waved his hand towards Erskine.

"Give way!" the Opposition Members called out. From the Government benches came jeering cries of "Sit down!" and "Can't take it!" Erskine smiled calmly. He had intended to sting the Opposition into indignation before the end of his speech, and he was content with the clamour and the waving of order papers. He sipped a glass of water, and gave a brief exhibition of the "Erskine Manner," which the visitors in the Strangers' Gallery strained forward to see.

For years the Parliamentary Correspondents had advertised and commented on his manner at the despatch box, until the Erskine Manner had become a public fashion. *Vogue* called it the "*déagé* Erskine Manner," and the escorts of its models, idling in the background of the photographs, not only wore the long, soft white collars, slightly curling at the tips, that Erskine usually wore; they also wore his ironic look, the faintly puzzled frown that had become customary to him as a result of his short-sightedness. The younger Members of Parliament imitated him too, acquiring the attractive lines around the eyes which came from his myopia, and the limp which had developed after he was wounded in the landings at Tsirmikos in the war.

"Order!" said the Speaker, rising from the recesses of his chair. He was six-foot-four, and when he stood his wig seemed almost to touch the gilded canopy. "Order!" he said again in his brusque, imperative voice, as the after ripples of laughter and discussion rolled in from the late-comers at the doors and from the deafer Members who had been pulling at their colleagues' elbows to find out what the joke was. "If the right honourable Gentleman declines to give way, he must be allowed to proceed. Mr. Erskine."

The Government back-benchers cheered loudly as Erskine continued. He glanced at Carrington, the Member who had tried to interrupt him, and said:

"The honourable Gentleman will, I hope, forgive me if I ask him to reserve his intervention for a later stage in the debate when—er—he may have the good fortune, sir, to catch your eye." He paused. "I was about to say that we must now no longer think in the narrow terms of nineteenth-century isolationism. For there is an isolationist party in Britain at least as vigorous and as dangerous as the isolationists of—other countries. They are political Luddites who want to smash the machine of co-operation because they prefer the fantasy of self-sufficiency . . ."

"Independence!" said Morgan without rising.

"Very well," said Erskine. ". . . the fantasy of independence to the reality of the Atlantic Community, where our future lies. It is the modern form of association which must first reinforce and then supplant the nation state, as in the past the nation state has replaced the city state, the principality and older feudal systems."

"Rubbi-ah!" Carrington shouted across the floor.

"We are engaged in a mighty partnership," Erskine continued.

"Tell that to the Yanks," an Opposition Member called out.

"I do beg honourable Gentlemen opposite to realise," Erskine said, his good-humoured expression fading, "that their irresponsible anti-Americanism can do nothing but damage to our common cause." His angry glance took in the tiers of benches from the despatch box to the light oak panelling on the wall. "Let them remember that when they demonstrate such vindictiveness and graceless hostility towards the United States."

Morgan rose, and Erskine, after a moment's hesitation, yielded to him. The Prime Minister, who till then had sat immobile, his neck rigid in his wing collar, whispered to Erskine as he wiped his forehead, "He'll always rise to a bumper."

Morgan spoke quietly, and the cries and counter-cries died away.

"If the right honourable Gentleman will allow me," he said, "he is repeating the old slander that we on this side of the House are anti-American. We are not." He said the last words firmly, and looked over his shoulder for the cheers from his supporters. "We are not anti-American. We are merely anti certain acts of the present American administration. It's not a bit of good the right honourable Gentleman turning on his old hurdy-gurdy of prejudice and mischief. Because we don't like this agreement, it doesn't mean we're anti-American. There's many an American doesn't like it either."

The Opposition back-benchers, heartened by Morgan's intervention, cheered loudly.

"That may well be," said Erskine, rising to continue his speech.

"It is," said Morgan from his place, putting his feet on the table, and settling back indifferently.

"That may well be," repeated Erskine. "But the right honourable Gentleman has never shrunk from the most demagogic encouragement of anti-American feeling—the worst kind of mass meanness—in order to win votes and discredit the Government." He pointed his finger challengingly at Morgan, and raised his voice.

"He has exploited our obligations under this agreement in order to pervert the public judgment. With his familiar ambivalence, he has come here—we heard him today—rationalising his pathological anti-Americanism, while up and down the country he has used that shameless emotionalism of which he is a master to stimulate precisely those ugly prejudices which here he repudiates. Sir, that is the very suborning of our democratic system."

"You should know!" Carrington called out

"It will scarcely encourage our American friends to proceed . . ."

Carrington rose to interrupt.

"Sit down!" the Government back-benchers shouted,

but Carrington didn't take his seat again, and in the blanketing din his mouth moved as if it were part of a film in which the sound-track had gone dead.

"On a point of Order!" he shouted at the top of his voice, making himself heard at last.

"Point of Order!" the Speaker repeated.

"On a point of Order," Carrington said, gripping the bench in front of him. His face was white with effort. "In view of reports coming from America . . ." He paused and looked around, waiting for silence. "Is the Minister aware that reports from America suggest that there has been considerable corruption in connection with this Agreement?"

As soon as he used the word "corruption" the Government benches broke into a clamour of "Withdraw! Withdraw!" but Carrington, who had resumed his seat, sat with folded arms.

Erskine rose again, and the shouts died away.

"The honourable Gentleman," he said, with a movement of his fingers towards Carrington, "the honourable Gentleman has a high reputation for . . ." he sought his words with assumed hesitancy, "for his exploration of the seamy side of public life. He has sustained it. But"—and now he eyed Carrington with a stare of distaste—"his most recent statement is as unworthy as it is inaccurate."

Again the Government back-benchers began to cheer and shout "Withdraw!"

Sir Christopher Dangerfield, a senior Government back-bencher, rose to ask, "On a point of Order, Mr. Speaker, should not the honourable Gentleman withdraw his most unworthy imputation?"

The Speaker stood and said, "I wasn't quite clear as to what the honourable Gentleman meant. I heard the word 'corruption,' but I naturally assumed that the word was not addressed to the Minister." There were shouts from the Government benches of, "It was!" "If that is so, then the honourable Gentleman must withdraw his imputation forthwith."

"Excellent," the Attorney General muttered. "Excellent,

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Michael. It's about time someone sat on Carrington—not lightly but with lead weights."

"He's a scavenger," said Erskine negligently.

"Mr. Speaker," said Carrington, surrounded by a discouraging silence, "my question was of general application. I made no reference to the Minister. I only wanted to ask——"

"Is the honourable Gentleman withdrawing his statement?" the Speaker asked with an overtone of menace.

"Yes, sir," said Carrington quickly. "If my remark seemed to reflect on the Minister, I naturally withdraw it. But I ought to add——"

"There is nothing further to add," said the Speaker. "Mr. Erskine."

Morgan put his hand on the despatch box as if to rise, but sat down again.

From the front row of the Speaker's Gallery, Jane Erskine, leaning over the rail in order to have a better view of the Government Front Bench beneath her, smiled down at her husband, and stirred her white gloves in greeting. This was her habitual place when her husband was making a major speech; and her intent expression, her lips murmuring at times the very words he was saying, her anguish when he was attacked and her contentment in his success, were at once the jest and admiration of the Opposition whom she confronted. Erskine raised his notes, and laid them on the table near the Mace. That was a private salute. Then he continued with his speech.

When he ended, the cheering was so persistent and continuous that the Rt. Hon. Fred Martindale, opening for the Opposition, was inaudible; and when at last the Hear-Hears had died away, the crowded Chamber rapidly began to empty in a clatter of conversation, with Members moving towards the Smoking Room and the tea-room. Martindale paused, grinned across to Erskine, and began his speech again.

"I would be failing in my duty," he said, "if I didn't"

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congratulate the right honourable Gentleman on his cogent and persuasive presentation of a singularly bad case. But then he was once upon a time a lawyer. I don't hold that against him. (Laughter from the Opposition.) If I may say so, it is a very distinguished profession. I know many lawyers. One should not underestimate their value. But surely, sir, even a lawyer should sometimes permit himself a doubt about his client. He should approach his brief with a little humility."

Mr Martindale hunched his shoulders and wagged a finger at Erskine.

"But you know, I found the right honourable Gentleman, if I may say so, just a little bit arrogant. That's naughty. We on this side of the House are used to the right honourable Gentleman. We like him. We don't deny his habitual charm, his gracious manner, his unfailing platitudes. But he mustn't try us too much. The Prime Minister—where's he got to?"

He peered over the despatch box at the Prime Minister, who had slid down on his bench so that his face was scarcely visible.

"The Prime Minister," Martindale went on, "is always at his elbow. Always ready to shove it in the wrong direction. Mind you, sir, they look different."

Erskine smiled negligently, but the Prime Minister, who disliked Martindale, muttered to himself without looking up.

"They look different. Yet the Prime Minister—if he will pardon my Latin—is really his *alter ego*."

"Get on with it!" a backbencher called out. "Talk about the Bill."

"The honourable Gentleman doesn't often present himself in our debates. Now that he is here, I would advise him to be patient . . ."

"Good old Fred!" said an Opposition Member, and the House settled down for a long speech.

When Martindale's speech ended, the Prime Minister grunted, walked ponderously towards the Speaker's chair, and from there gave Erskine a friendly beckon.

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At the swing doors a messenger, stiff in his white tie and gilt chain of office, said, "Mr. Erskine, sir," and held out a green card, informing him that a visitor had called to see him, and was waiting in the Central Lobby. Erskine glanced at the unfamiliar name, and put the card into his coat pocket, before catching the Prime Minister up, and walking in silence at his side to his room.

The Prime Minister sat in his arm-chair and said, "Take a scat, Michael." He brooded for a few moments with his hands pressed together. "Yes," he said to himself. "Yes."

Erskine waited. He was used to the Prime Minister's reflective soliloquies.

"Hit him for six. Over the gasworks," said the Prime Minister. "It was time."

"Carrington, sir?" asked Erskine.

The Prime Minister didn't answer. He still had a ruminant expression on his face as he stared at the long table across the room.

"The only way to deal with Carrington is to slap him down," Erskine went on.

"Yes," said the Prime Minister. "That's meet him half-way down the pitch. Who told the Press about the Treasury?"

His bearing had changed abruptly. Instead of leaning forward, he was now sitting upright in his chair, his hands pressed flat on the table, with his strong square fingers splayed. His grey eyes, normally sunk under his thick eyebrows, now opened wide as he looked straight at Erskine.

Erskine hesitated. "I'm sorry, Prime Minister," he said at last. "I can't tell you. I don't know. The information leaked. After all, it isn't the first time news has leaked. Spencer's a menace."

"Have you been speaking to Spencer? Have you seen him lately?"

"I never speak to the man—never," said Erskine. "He was at Huberton over the week-end. We didn't speak to each other. At least I don't think so. No, not one word."

"Well," said the Prime Minister, dismissing the subject.

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"It doesn't matter who told him. The point is—it's out. We'll have to hold it over, Michael. We can't have the Sunday newspapers making the Cabinet. You understand?"

"I understand, sir," said Erskine. "I'm terribly sorry about the whole thing."

"We'll hold it till next month. Rain stopped play. It sometimes happens."

"Thank you, sir," said Erskine. "You've been very understanding. It was a great shock. . . ."

The Prime Minister walked around the table, and put his hand on Erskine's shoulder. "When's the Committee Stage of the American Bill?"

"In about a fortnight, sir."

"Did I tell you what I thought of your speech today?" Erskine smiled and shook his head.

"Well, I'll tell you now. It was first-rate. A most masterly performance. A captain's innings. Has the writ been issued for the Cwmbrau election?"

"Yesterday."

"And Vaughan's standing?"

"So I hear. I'm told that he turned it down, and then, suddenly, something must have happened, and he changed his mind."

"Poor Vaughan! Morgan will squeeze him dry. If he wins, Morgan will toss him on to the back benches. If he loses, he'll never hear from him again. If the old man could see those two together, he'd laugh till he cried. It's strange to think how much he disliked the two men who were closest to him. . . . They're going to make the Agreement the chief issue. You know that?"

"I imagined they would."

"Well, watch them, Michael. We mustn't lose Cwmbrau. Not with our present majority. They'll distort anything you say in Committee. Take care. And take care what you say in the country. They're after you. I sniffed it this afternoon. Did you see Morgan after Carrington withdrew?"

"Yes, I thought he was coming in to give him a hand."

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"He was," said the Prime Minister reflectively. "He was, and then he thought better of it. Take care, Michael. They're waiting for you to put a foot wrong."

Erskine smiled to the Prime Minister at the door, and toyed with the steel helmet, a war-time relic, on the hat-stand."

"Don't worry," he said. "I can look after myself. . . ."

"And one other thing, Michael," said the Prime Minister, as Erskine put his hand on the door-knob. "Carrington. Corruption. You know, that will be repeated. It's a sort of infection from the Senate Committee."

"The Senate Committee?"

"The Senate Committee on Improper Influences. These things are in the air. It's like influenza. Communism, Fascism, inquisitions—they're carried by travellers. I hear that the United Middleton Machine Tool Corporation has been mentioned in the inquiry. I want your assurance—it's superfluous, I know—but I want it none the less. I want your assurance that to your knowledge no one in our delegation has had anything to do with the type of malpractice now being investigated." The Prime Minister spoke the last sentence slowly, and as if reluctantly.

Erskine turned the handle of the door. The crowded days of negotiation and entertainment jostled through his mind and rose to his memory like the debouching of passengers from a New York subway—fans and iced water, the languid belly-voices of fat men, nylon shirts and friendly handshakes, the rapid exchange of first names, the cool women, impeccable in composition, the cocktail parties and his secretaries in the next room at the hotel with the typewriters tapping late into every night. Erskine had returned straight from America to his Ministry, with only his two days at Huberton as an intermission. For a second he had the hallucination that he was back in Washington, that the Agreement had not been initialled, and that the remembered voices that surged in his thoughts with the familiar phrases of the negotiations were continuing an unfinished discussion.

". . . now being investigated." The Prime Minister's

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last words came to him like an echo, and he looked up, the image dispelled.

"I'm sorry you had to ask me that, sir," he said. "I had a very fine and loyal staff. They couldn't have worked harder or behaved better."

The Prime Minister nodded.

"I give you my word of honour," Erskine continued, "that to my knowledge no member of my delegation engaged in any act of corruption. I take full responsibility for everything."

"I'm sorry I had to ask you. . . . Mind you, Michael, you have one great fault. You don't cultivate the clergy. Take my advice. Dine with a bishop in public. The Strangers' Dining-room for preference. There's such a thing as virtue by association."

Erskine walked towards the library, hot with anger and offence. A policeman outside the Speaker's door saluted, but he ignored him.

"Hit him for six. A sneak to the boundary. Took his middle. Run him out. Run him out." The Prime Minister's cricketing metaphors trundled in his ears, like the instructions of Parkes, an old and detested games master.

"To hell with him!" he said to himself, and took out the green card from his pocket. "Westover Collindale, Claridge's Hotel," he read. "Personal." He walked into the cathedral gloom of the Central Lobby, and looked upwards to the great chandelier with its flowering candelabras.

He stood for a few moments on the edge of the octagonal hall, by the library corridor, staring at the dark shapes of the constituents and visitors who were waiting for a Member, or for the absolute voice of the policeman at the barrier announcing that a Member was not available. Erskine felt annoyed with himself. Since he had been a Minister, he had left the first duty of inspecting visitors to his Parliamentary Private Secretary. Scott-Palmer had been a good P.P.S. He had sieved them all—madmen, admirers, friends, important constituents, overseas visitors and all the rest of them.

Some he had escorted to the door, others to an inner lobby, and a few to his room. Scott-Palmer's resignation, after Gascoigne had been made Under-Secretary, had left him without a P.P.S., but he was reluctant to choose another until he'd taken the advice of the Chief Whip.

Erskine caught sight of Earl Russell's statue, and laughed. The oratorical stance, the lofty expression, the stylised posture, all reminded him of Scott-Palmer. Had Earl Russell grown like that or, like Scott-Palmer, had he always been rigid in marble? "I can only regret," he had written in his letter of resignation, "that such merit as I lacked had not been impressed on me by yourself during the time when, devotedly and without expectation of reward, I had carried out the arduous and often uncongenial tasks of being your Parliamentary Private Secretary. To have been passed over for preferment I can understand. But it would be unsuitable for me to continue as your P.P.S. if your estimate of my merit is as low as the P.M.'s decision, no doubt on your recommendation, makes manifest."

"The pompous ass," Erskine said to himself. "But how right!" He hadn't wanted Scott-Palmer as his Under-Secretary, and had shrugged his shoulders disparagingly when the Prime Minister had suggested him. His homilies, his pauses for thought before answering simple questions and his platinum watch chain—oh, God! that platinum watch chain—had all become as irksome to him as an ulcer. He was as glad to rid himself of Scott-Palmer as he had been to leave Tsirmikos in 1900. The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece. He looked up at the traceries of the roof, the carved bosses and the mosaics, and closed his mind. The light flowing through the great windows glittered on the figure of St. George trampling the dragon, while Fortitude with her club and Purity with her lilies attended him.

From time to time a visitor would look at Erskine, and gradually, as he stood there, he became a focus for side-glances and heard his name repeated in a familiar and gratifying murmur. "Collindale," he read again. "Claridge's."

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Now his anger with the Prime Minister had subsided a little. Perhaps after all he meant well.

"Hello, Michael," said a passing Member.

"Hello, Teddy," Erskine answered smiling. It was the famous smile, the Constituency Smile, the Erskine Smile. His enemies said that it sprang straight from the lips. A pucker at the temples, a narrowing of the eyes, the twist of the mouth—Erskine knew exactly what it looked like. In its absolute form it was his election photograph. He smiled at another colleague as he made his way to the policeman at the barrier, a heavy figure, youthfully paternal.

"Hello, P.C. 'Eves," he said. "Try this one."

He handed over the green card. The policeman smiled back at him, and the whole crescent of waiting constituents smiled at Erskine too. Erskine had smiled—everyone was smiling to Erskine.

"Mr. Westover Collindale," Eves called. His voice crashed into the light conversation in the Central Lobby and deadened it. There was a hush. The name was unfamiliar. The crescent was silent, Erskine looked from the door of St. Stephen's Hall to the Library Corridor.

"Give him another shout," he said. "Perhaps he's gone. Let's hope so!"

The policeman grinned and called the name again. Another silence, while the visitors stood stiffly, waiting.

At the side of the barrier there was a slight ripple behind a group of women. They moved apart, and a shortish man in a high collar pushed his way forward. Erskine was looking again at Lord Russell's statue, and didn't notice him till he heard his name.

"Mr. Erskine," a deep voice said. "This is indeed a great pleasure. And an honour. I didn't think we'd meet again so soon."

For a moment Erskine failed to recognise the man who stood in front of him, holding his gloves and hat in his left hand. But then he remembered. This was Hendryk Curtis—the brown suit, the Derby hat, the tight three-button jacket—Curtis, the business-consultant and public relations

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man who had always been hanging about in Washington and New York during the discussions on the Agreement. Curtis, who as he had once told him at a cocktail party, had some of the biggest accounts in the U.S.A. Erskine could see him walking respectfully at the elbow of the President of United Middleton Machine Tools. He remembered him clearly now. Curtis, who at the end of every meeting was always there shaking hands. He had even been with them to New Jersey for the farewell party. The roulette game too. And now here he was in the House of Commons. "Don't forget to look me up when you're in England!" This was the price of amiability.

"How very kind of you to look me up!" Erskine said.

Before Erskine was conscious of the action, Curtis was shaking him by the hand, and drawing him away from the crowd to one of the leather benches.

"I came B.O.A.C. Excellent service. You have my congratulations."

"You're here on holiday?"

"Oh, no, on business," Curtis smiled. "That's why I've come to see you."

Erskine, who had taken a seat next to him, rose quickly.

"There's one thing I don't understand," he said. His voice was chilled, and he had to control a tremor in it. "I don't understand, Mr. Curtis. Who is Westover Collindale?" He folded the green card between his fingers.

"*Moi*," said Curtis. "I was kidding. Tell you the truth, it's just one of my pseudonyms—if you see what I mean."

He drew Erskine down to the seat.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Business Consultant

A PLEASURE-STEAMER came heaving past the bank with a wash that slapped in waves against the steps near the Speaker's House. Through a megaphone, a guide shouted the sights of Parliament to the neat rows of excursionists who packed the seats on the boat, and exchanged greetings with two or three Opposition Members leaning over the parapet. The Terrace was preparing for evening. In the small dining-rooms leading from it the waiters had finished laying the cutlery, and now, snatching a few moments of the first breeze that blew from the river after the day's heat, stood near the windows awaiting the guests. Within the long shadow of the building, Members and their friends had begun an evening promenade over the patterned stone of the Terrace, from one notice marked "Peers Only" to the other marked "Members Only," where the unaccompanied found consolation in exclusiveness.

Inside the green-tiled Terrace Bar, Curtis sat at ease, listening with pleasure to the summer sounds from outside of footsteps on flags, the click of glasses on the tables and the amble of conversation. Only the rattle of the annunciator on the wall, springing into a mechanical vitality as it spelt out the name of the Member who was speaking, distracted him from the swing doors through which Erskine had gone when the Division Bells had rung. He wasn't in a hurry. He took another sip at his tomato-juice.

Blair, an elderly Member, a regular of the bar, who was drinking a pint of bitter, called across the table to him in a forthright North Country voice, "It's a lovely evening."

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"It's a lovely evening," repeated Curtis.

"Like a turn on the Terrace?"

"Thanks," said Curtis. "Thanks a lot."

They walked as far as the parapet, the Member carrying his tankard, and Curtis said, "It's very kind of you, sir."

He subdued his voice to match the solemn permanence of the architecture, the innumerable slim, blind windows rising in perpendicular stillness, the lacework and traceries of grey stone, the symmetry of the Speaker's House at one end of the Terrace and of the House of Lords at the other, the mouldings and carvings and crockets that decorated its austere geometry—the revival Gothic of Pugin that seemed in his eyes coexistent with history.

"Nice," he said.

"We're on the night shift tonight, lad," said the elderly Member when they returned to the bar a few moments later. He sat with his legs apart, his heavy belly distending his waistcoat. "The buggers are keeping us up."

"Yes," said Curtis.

"But we're ready for them. I trained forty years down the pit for this. Day shifts, night shifts—everything. If those buggers think they'll wear us under, they'd better start thinking again."

"Yes," said Curtis.

"Mind you, they know a bit about it too," the other went on. "They've been training in night-clubs."

"Yes," said Curtis.

"Ay!" said Blair, sucking at his pipe. Then he added reflectively, "The buggers!"

"Hello, Dick," said Erskine, coming in at the end of their conversation. "What are you annoyed about now?"

"It's all right, Michael, lad. I'm not worrying about you. You're a good'n. It's the bad'ns I'm talking of. The Prime Minister, the Leader of the House, the Chief Whip, the Chancellor . . ." He started counting them on his fingers.

"Never mind, Dick," said Erskine. "As long as you can talk and drink and . . ."

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Blair laughed and winked at Curtis. "He doesn't know," he said. "I'm im-pō-tent." He put the accent on the second syllable. "See," he said, rising to go and giving Erskine a friendly push. "That caught you. I'm im-po-tent." Shaking with laughter, he moved out like a yawing ship.

"Your friend is proud of his qualifications," said Curtis. "You like a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Erskine, taking a seat next to him. "I'm sorry I had to leave you before. I think we'll be having a few more Divisions, so let's get down to things."

He looked at Curtis attentively, as if he were receiving a deputation.

"Up to you, Mr. Erskine," said Curtis.

Erskine waited a few moments. Then he said, "That game in New York . . ."

"That's it," said Curtis encouragingly.

"It was a most pleasant evening."

"Very pleasant."

Another pause.

"I didn't have very good luck," said Erskine.

They both laughed, and Curtis finished his tomato-juice.

"You should have played the colours," he said.

"Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Curtis?" Erskine asked in a friendly tone.

"I wondered," said Curtis in a hesitant voice, "I wondered if you . . . if it would be convenient for you to repay me the dollars I lent you. . . ."

Erskine looked quickly round at the nearby tables and the bar where Members and their guests were chatting desultorily.

"I don't understand," he said.

"The dollars I lent you . . ." Curtis repeated, his voice edging upwards. "Two thousand seven hundred. Remember?"

"I remember the game," said Erskine. He put his arm on the back of Curtis's chair, and said restfully, "I had a

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handful of dollars—about a hundred—and lost. You then lent me fifty dollars' worth of chips. Does that ring a bell?"

Curtis listened, nodding his head with interest.

"I lost those—they went in about ten minutes—and I said I'd pay you back next day."

"Right!" said Curtis.

"You wanted to go on playing . . ."

"Right!"

"I said I wanted to get back to the hotel, but you said, 'Don't let's break up the party. Want some chips?' or something of the sort. Isn't that so?"

Curtis didn't answer.

"Then you said, 'Play from my pile.' The idea was . . . it was to be a sort of common pool. If I'd won . . ." His voice diminished and died.

Curtis puffed a mouthful of smoke and shook his head sadly.

"You politicians are all the same—American and British. Always want to forget your losses. Why, I once knew a Senator—never mind! It wasn't a common pool, Mr. Erskine. You were shovelling in your loan account. That's all. Two thousand seven hundred dollars. It was a bad night. I lost four hundred myself. But you're a big player. You played the numbers. That's why you lost so quickly."

"The whole thing's absurd," said Erskine. He wanted to wipe his forehead, but the gesture would have seemed a concession to Curtis. "It's all nonsense, nonsense. You have absolutely no proof . . ."

"Proof?" said Curtis, reaching for an ash-tray. "Proof? I thought English gentlemen had certain standards. You can't mean that, Mr. Erskine. Proof of a gambling debt?"

"I imagine you settled our debts," said Erskine coldly.

"Of course," said Curtis. "I settled your debts at my expense. That's what it's all about. Would you care to get me another tomato-juice?"

Erskine went to the bar and ordered the drink.

"It's the heat," said the barmaid, polishing her glasses on her white smock. "You all right, Mr. Erskine?"

"Yes," said Erskine absently. "Why?"

"You look a bit queer," said the barmaid. "It's this heat. Gets you down."

"Thank you," said Curtis, when Erskine had carried the tomato-juice over to his table. "It's very hospitable of you, very! But I was saying," he went on with an easy smile, "if you want proof . . ."

"Some of your friends?"

"No, one of yours. An English lady of the highest repute. *Persona grata* in the best diplomatic circles. Society hostess. Everything."

Erskine thought of the women he'd met in New York and Washington. "You mean Lady Applebourne?"

"Certainly I mean her. I have here Lady Applebourne's affidavit swearing that she saw me lend you two thousand seven hundred dollars. See what I mean?"

"What is it you're after, Curtis?" asked Erskine. He had rethought his tactics rapidly. "For heaven's sake, don't let's be silly and mysterious! I don't acknowledge the debt—I thought we were all playing together—but I don't mind. I'm ready to pay you the money, if you thought it a loan. When do you want it?"

"You can't pay me the money," said Curtis calmly.

"Why not? Of course I can pay it. I'll pay you tomorrow—in my solicitor's office—and you'll give me a receipt."

"You can't pay me the money," Curtis repeated. "I want it in dollars. Yes, dollars. Not pesetas or escudos or francs or lire, not sterling, not even gold bars. I want it in dollars, Mr. Erskine."

"I can't pay you in dollars. It's against the exchange regulations."

"No. You can't pay in dollars. You oughtn't even to try and pay me in sterling." Curtis clucked with his lips. "That's kind of illegal, too. What would the Chancellor say? But it's immaterial. I want dollars."

Erskine didn't answer for a few moments. A group of Members, chatting in loud, cheerful voices, greeted him as they passed through the bar on their way to the Terrace.

"Hello, Michael," one of them called out. "Getting into bad company?"

Erskine, whose description of the Members' Bar, as an "aseptic bagnio" was well known—no one had ever seen him drink in it—said, "Yes."

Curtis laughed, a little laugh that showed his regular, sheep-like teeth. He stroked his moustache and said, "Good, good. Yes, that's very good."

"How long are you here for?" Erskine asked abruptly.

"Not long," said Curtis. "I'm, so to speak, on furlough. Having a little holiday. I've got to be back for the political sessions."

"The political sessions?"

"That's what I said. I'm helping one of the Senate Committees. Aren't I good enough for you to introduce me to some of your friends?"

Curtis's smile had disappeared, and he was facing Erskine with spiteful eyes. Erskine looked from him to the Members and their friends standing at the bar, some of whom he had nodded to while Curtis was talking.

He was about to answer brusquely, but he stopped. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to be discourteous."

"Well?" said Curtis.

"Of course. Christopher!"

Sir Christopher Dangerfield walked over to him carrying a tankard of beer.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine. This is——"

"Westover Collindale," said Curtis. "I am honoured, sir."

"Sir Christopher Dangerfield," said Erskine, completing the introduction. "An assiduous questioner, the Minister's scourge. One of our senior Members."

Dangerfield looked at Curtis with the curiosity of a carriage dog sniffing an inert but life-sized model of itself.

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The old-fashioned, three-button jackets with the single vent, the high collars, the narrow trousers—both men wore them. But whereas Dangerfield had retained the fashion of his youth, Curtis seemed adorned in fancy-dress. And like a pretty girl at a party who finds that her flock is a copy of a more perfect original worn by a more beautiful woman smiling to her with an exaggerated graciousness, Curtis flushed.

"If three of my colleagues drop dead," said Dangerfield, hurrying politely past the hiatus of doubt, "I'll be the Father of the House. Not that I'm the oldest, but I came here a long time ago, twenty-six years ago. I've seen six of our Governments. You know, when the P.M. formed his first Government ten years ago and left me out, I thought he'd done it accidentally. When he left me out of his second Government, I thought he'd done it through an oversight. The third time he left me out, I realised he'd done it on purpose."

"Never mind," said Erskine. "Constituents don't like their Members to become Ministers. They think they've less time for the constituency. Console yourself, Christopher."

"That's all very well," said Dangerfield, sitting down. "But it's dangerous to stay too long on the back benches. Last week my Chairman came up to me and said, 'Chris, we want to make you a little presentation.' 'Silver tea-service?' I said to him. 'Yes,' he said. 'How did you guess?' 'Oh!' I said, 'I know how generous you are. But no, I can't accept. Perhaps in five years' time.'"

"But my dear Christopher, why not?" said Erskine. "After all, a silver tea-service . . ."

"That's just it," said Dangerfield. "A silver tea-service. It's the Order of Departure—it's the Constituency's Borgia feast—it's the first warning that at the next General Meeting you'll get a vote of thanks for long service, and perhaps an introduction to your young successor. No, Michael, beware of silver tea-services." He turned to Curtis. "And you, sir. Are you a politician?"

"Not exactly," said Curtis. "I ought to tell you, sir, we at home regard politics as almost an indecent profession. I mean

you might go into it for the sake of your family. And that's O.K. But you wouldn't put your son or daughter into it if you could help it. As a politician your rating in society is no higher than a coin-machine operator."

"I'm astonished," said Dangerfield. "Most astonished. I've met a few Congressmen here and there in Europe, and they've all seemed to me to be admirable men—most high-minded and idealistic."

"They're the worst," said Curtis flatly. "When you know a politician's in the game for money—fixing things—you know where you stand. But when they say they're in it for idealism, you don't know the price. What they want then is power, up and up till before you can say piflok they're running for the Presidential primaries."

"I'm astonished," said Dangerfield.

"Hey!" said Curtis, with an engaging smile. Dangerfield waited for him to continue. "Don't take me seriously. I'm kidding. I'm always kidding. To tell you the truth, I'm a friend of the politicians, so to speak. A politician's politician. What you might call a back-room boy."

"Smoke-filled back-room boy," said Dangerfield. "That's very nice. I never know how American politics work . . . district leaders, captains, block leaders. I simply can't follow it. How does it work?"

"Oh, just the same as here," said Curtis. "You know, candidates, elections, the voice of the people, a little organisation. I'm a Party man. I organise opinion. Create personalities. Yes, perhaps there is one difference. An American candidate makes a whole lot of promises to a few people—judgeships, secretaryships, postmasterships and so on. A British candidate makes a few promises to a whole lot of people."

"Our promises are perhaps not so specific as yours," said Dangerfield.

"Not so concrete. You can forget your promises with a smile. Our politicians who forget don't live long. What d'you say, Michael?"

"What?" said Drskine.

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Curtis frowned. "I was giving Sir Christopher an actuarial view of American politicians."

"How long are you staying in England?" Dangerfield asked.

"Everyone asks me that question," said Curtis. "Only a few weeks. On Tuesday I'm going to spend a few days in the country with Lord Clouston—he's the cousin of my good friend Lady Applebourne. You know her, of course?"

"I know her name."

"I always stay with Edward and Diana when I'm in England. They'd be mad at me if I didn't. I gave them a party when they came to New York—big event. Then I may be going on to Portofino. Martin Gosford's got his yacht there. But I don't want to miss Lady Putain's ball for Andrea. You invited?"

"No," said Dangerfield.

Curtis waved his hand and pursed his lips as if to say, "Better luck next time."

"One can't go everywhere," he said. "You must be glad when the season's over."

"Oh, no," said Dangerfield. "I never notice it's there."

When Dangerfield had gone, Erskine said to Curtis, "What is it you want?"

"I want to cancel your debt," said Curtis in a calm, comforting voice. "I was only kidding before. Didn't you hear me tell your pal? I'm always kidding."

"Cancel it?" Erskine looked at him with a sudden hope, a new easement, as if an incubus clinging to his lacerated flesh with hooked claws had abruptly relaxed its embrace.

"Yes, Mr. Erskine, I want to cancel it. You see, you got it wrong from the word go. I came here today as a friend. After all, we're not babes. We're men of the world. You're a politician, I'm a business consultant. You don't think those dollars you played with came from the fairies. They came from the Corporation."

"The Corporation?"

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"Sure, sure. The United Middleton Machine Tool Corporation. I'm their agent. That's why I got the affidavit. No harm in it. Just to cover me. That's all it is. But you jumped the gun. You began to abuse me, to berate me."

Curtis was nodding his head with a melancholy droop of self-pity as he spoke. "You didn't give me a chance to say what was on my mind. You didn't even introduce me to your friends."

"Oh, come," said Erskine, patting Curtis's arm. "I'm fearfully sorry. It's just that—well, the whole thing is worrying. It's been most oppressive. You know how it is . . . that evening . . . we were all feeling pretty happy. It was idiotic of me to have got into that game."

"Forget it, Mr. Erskine. I've got authority—no, I'm prevaricating . . . begin again—I've been instructed to cancel the debt. Frankly, we don't want it on the books, not even in the petty-cash. It was as embarrassing to us as it was to you."

"And the affidavit?"

"Forget that too. I had to show it. I can tear it up. The Applebourne girl won't mind. She works for us."

At that moment Gascoigne, short and blubber-lipped, came in with Jane.

"I found her desolate in the Central Lobby," he said.

"A whole hour, Michael," said Jane reproachfully. "It's lucky you've got a gallant Under-Secretary."

Gascoigne turned the papers in his hands, groping for an adequate gallantry that he couldn't find.

"My name is Collindale, Westover Collindale," said Curtis, introducing himself.

"Yes, I'm so sorry. This is my wife—Geoffrey Gascoigne—Mr. Collindale."

"How do you do, Mrs. Erskine. How do you do, Mr. Gascoigne," said Curtis, shaking their hands. "This is a pleasure, Mrs. Erskine. Michael spoke a lot about you when he was in the States."

"Oh, how interesting," said Jane eagerly. "You must tell

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me all about it. Michael is so reticent about his travels. I want you to tell me everything."

"Everything, Mrs. Erskine."

They sat and spoke together, while Gascoigne drew Erskine aside to discuss his brief for an Adjournment Motion.

"What time do you expect it, Geoffrey?"

"I don't know. The Whips say this thing's going on all night. Perhaps it'll come on at five or six tomorrow morning. Are you paired?"

Erskine shrugged his shoulders. "The Chief said he'd get me one. I want to take Jane to dinner as soon as I've got rid of my visiting blight."

"Now then, Michael. Remember the Bill!"

"Darling," Jane called out to him. "Are you free on Friday?"

"Yes," said Erskine, looking at his diary.

"Oh, good! I've asked Mr. Collindale if he could dine with us."

"Why I'd be delighted," said Curtis.

"We'll show each other some more of our pictures. Mr. Collindale's got the most lovely family, Michael."

"Four daughters," said Curtis.

"And a wife who plays the clarinet."

"What time and where, Mrs. Erskine?"

Jane wrote down the address, and added, "Any time between seven-thirty and eight. That's our ritual when Michael's at home."

Erskine had stood up without speaking. Then he said quietly, "If you take Jane upstairs, Geoffrey, I'll follow with Mr. Collindale. There are one or two things I want to discuss with him."

They walked in two couples at a distance of about five yards from each other.

"You were saying . . ." said Erskine.

"About Friday?"

"No, about the dollars."

"What about them?"

A sour vomit rose into Erskine's mouth. He wanted to take hold of Curtis's head and drive it through one of the cases that lined the corridor walls, and press it among the jagged glass and the medals.

"You said . . . you had instructions to cancel it."

"But of course, I thought we'd dealt with that. I'll give you the affidavit on Friday. Tear it up yourself."

"Thank you," said Erskine. "I'm greatly obliged. Thank you very much."

They walked in silence up the stairs, close behind Jane and Gascoigne, and arrived at the Central Lobby.

"There's Helen," said Jane.

Helen Vaughan was standing at St. Stephen's door, talking to a policeman.

"Hello, darling," said Jane. "What are you doing here? Getting atmosphere?"

Helen smiled. "I thought Michael was going to cut me. He's looking so grim. No, I'm not after politicians. I'm cultivating the Press. You know John starts his campaign today?"

Erskine glanced at her evening dress beneath her white fur coat.

"I know," he said. "It deserves a celebration."

"You're being feline, Michael."

"Not a bit of it," said Jane. "I suspect he's jealous."

Erskine looked at her angrily, and from her to Spencer, who was approaching. "I think we'd better carry on," he said.

"You're late," said Spencer, unsmiling.

Erskine took Jane's arm.

"I waited," said Spencer.

"Goodbye, Helen," Erskine said quickly. But Helen was already walking off with Spencer, apologising.

In St. Stephen's Hall a long queue was waiting for admission to the debate. "Erskine! Michael Erskine!" The name moved in a gentle mutter along the rows, and each face turned towards him.

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"It wouldn't help for you to travel incognito," said Curtis, hurrying along a few inches behind Erskine. Jane had remained with Gascoigne in the Central Lobby.

"No," said Erskine. He ignored the curious glances, as indifferent to them as to the statues on either side of the narrow passage.

From the top of the steps, he guided Curtis quickly into the vast, chilling emptiness of Westminster Hall. Curtis paused on the second flight of stairs and surveyed the soaring hammer-beam roof, spreading its great span from wall to wall. From habit, Erskine began to describe its history.

"This is where Parliament first assembled."

"It's imposing," said Curtis. "It's very historical."

"It's thirteenth century."

"That's a long time. The British are good stayers."

They walked together over the stone paving of the Hall to New Palace Yard, and Erskine told Curtis of the great events that had taken place there. The Coronation banquets, the trials, the lying-in-state of kings.

"You must be very proud of your traditions," said Curtis in his deep voice.

"We all are," said Erskine. "Would you like a taxi?"

"In one moment," said Curtis. They were now standing outside the entrance to the Hall. "There's just one thing, Michael, I wanted to mention to you before I go. Just a small thing. You can help me. I know you would want to."

"What is it?" Erskine asked. He drew away slightly from Curtis as though to defend himself.

"It's like this," said Curtis, turning his yellow gloves over in his hand. "The Ectolin Vertical Borer Corporation wants to ship three million dollars' worth of machinery to Britain."

"Well," said Erskine crisply.

"Well, I act for them. They need licences. . . . You give them. . . . It's legal. . . . It's your duty—you recommend the licences." He paused, and added, "Would you like me to call at the Ministry tomorrow?"

Erskine put his hands in his pockets. The incubus was

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back. He could feel the constriction of his throat, the blood draining from his heart.

"I see. These licences . . . That's the condition of sale. You cancel your claim if I give you the licences."

"That's it," said Curtis. "What time tomorrow?"

"Joe!" Erskine called to the policeman on duty. "Get this gentleman a taxi."

He walked to the doors of Westminster Hall.

"Thanks a lot," he heard Curtis say from the window of the taxi. "I'll call you at ten tomorrow."

CHAPTER 31

The May Ball

BY THE TIME they reached Royston, Spencer, who had changed into evening dress at his flat in Marsham Street while Helen waited in her car, had still hardly spoken. His stiff collar was tight, and clung unpleasantly to his neck as he drove angrily through the warm night.

When they stopped at the level crossing, he said, "Give me a cigarette!"

She gave him a cigarette from her lacquered case, and lit it for him. As he took the first puff she said, "Don't be horrid to me. Please!" Till then she had sat upright, her face set firmly towards the road, but now she turned her small head towards him, appealing and defeated.

The gates swung open, and he put the car into gear, settling back in his seat. He jabbed his foot at the clutch, pressed over-hard on the accelerator, and the low black car jostled forward.

"Why did you keep me waiting?" he asked sullenly. "And why were you talking to Erskine?"

"Oh, Tony! He ran into me. I only spoke two words to him."

After a few more moments of silence, she stretched out her hand timorously and laid it on his knee. Spencer put his hand over hers, pressing her slim fingers and intertwining and relaxing his own between them. In the fleeting light of a village street he saw that he was driving at nearly seventy miles an hour, and he eased his foot from the accelerator.

"All right, darling," he said. "It's over. It was seeing

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you talking to him after I'd been waiting. Like adding insolence to injury."

"H'm," said Helen.

"Well, wasn't it?" said Spencer.

"In time, Tony," she said, "perhaps you'll forgive him for the harm you did him."

"That was an accident. I can't help it if he got in the way of a good story."

"But it was about him."

"Of course it was. That's my point. It might just as well have been about anyone else—Smith, Jones, anyone. As a journalist, I may be malicious. But no one should take my malice personally."

He drove the car fast and exultantly past the dark haystacks and fields on the empty road to Cambridge.

"Have you got the tickets?"

She opened her handbag. "Yes, I have. It's so exciting. When were you last at the Trinity Ball?"

"Last year."

"Oh! Whom were you with?"

"Some people you don't know."

Her mind moved rapidly over his possible partners, accusing now one, now another of the women they both knew, till, frustrated, her jealousy abandoned its search for an object, and she shrugged her shoulders.

"When were *you* here last?" Spencer asked.

"Ages ago. With John. You weren't up together?"

"Good Lord, no! He's about eight years older than I am. He was up with Erskine."

Their eyes met in a glint of light on the driving mirror, and Helen said, "Don't boast. I'm only three years older than you are."

Spencer grinned, and whispered, "Four." He touched with his lips the faint down underneath her ear. "No woman is really lovely before the age of thirty. Pretty, attractive, sweet, even beautiful—you can say that of a girl in her teens or a woman in her twenties. But loveliness; that's much rarer. It's a product of maturity and cultivation."

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"It sounds rather horrid. You make me feel like a succulent in a hot-house."

He had stopped the car where the road narrowed by a bridge, and had begun to take her face in his hands when a lorry behind them squealed with its brakes to a stop. He started the engine again, and she said, "Kisses in the front of a car with the steering-wheel in one's midriff make me feel twenty again."

"At twenty," Spencer said, "you would have been my girl-friend. Now you're my accomplice."

"Your accomplice. I'm not sure if I like that."

"How did you get off tonight?" he asked.

"Let's not talk about that."

"I want to."

"He wanted me to go with him to Cwmbrau for the Adoption Meeting. You see, we already had these tickets. There was to have been a party. But when he agreed to stand we had to change our plans."

"I see."

"No, you don't see. I'd always yearned to go with you to the Trinity Ball. It was one of my dreams. One of my private fantasies when I thought about you. And when he had to go to Cwmbrau—well!"

She opened the side window and flicked her cigarette ash into the wind.

"We're villains," said Spencer.

"Yes," said Helen. "We like it."

After parking the car in the market-place, they walked idly, arm-in-arm, past the soaring darkness of King's Chapel towards Trinity College, where in the Great Court, now lit by the half-moon, the patter from the fountain accompanied their footsteps. The clock began to strike eleven, and as it did so, a commotion of bells rose from John's and Christ's and Caius, discordant and harmonious, pre-appointed and assertive, chiming in echelon over the quiet city, till they died away leaving the courts to voices.

"The wistaria—it's still there—on the Master's House," said Helen. "Oh, Tony, are you glad you came?"

"I'm very content," he said. "And you?"

"I feel as though for the first time for years and years I'm free, as if I'd escaped and become a person again."

Beyond the bridge over the river, where the lawns ran down to the willows, was the marquee for dancing. Helen stopped by the arched entrance to New Court, and looked at the Chinese lanterns dangling along the avenue of elm trees that led to the river.

"Isn't this heaven, Tony?" she said. "It hasn't changed at all. Not one bit."

"No," said Spencer. "Perhaps the undergraduates are a bit younger."

A group of undergraduates with their partners jostled past them enthusiastically.

"And the chaperones are younger too."

"Yes," said Helen thoughtfully.

"As far as I remember," Spencer went on, raising an eyebrow, "the average age of the undergraduates was about thirty-three. Now the chaperones. . ."

"Don't be silly," said Helen. "I won't want either of us—you or me—to be anything but what we are now. But 'now' I'd like to last for a long, long time. Years and years and years and years. I feel young tonight, young and very happy."

They danced with their faces pressed close to each other, absorbed in their anonymity. They knew and were known to no one. Around them, to the music of the unceasing and alternating bands, moved unfamiliar young faces, gay and contented, changing and revolving in different couples, forming an endless variant of pleasure in the warm summer night. Through the door of the marquee they could see the slow procession, moth-like and elusive, of faces and white shirts and arms and bright frocks, shimmering out of the darkness on the other side of the river; while from the lilacs in the gardens of Clare came great puffs of scent that trailed in the odour of the lawns and sweat and women's perfume.

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And with the music was the sound of laughter, voices linked as if they were arfas, a twittering from the lawns beyond the marquee's lights, and the college manciple in his dinner-jacket, standing gravely on the Bridge scrutinising the guests.

"I love this," said Helen, clinging to Spencer as they walked along the red carpet that led to the cloisters of Nevile's Court. "I feel as if I've been translated into a different world, where I've become what I always wanted to be."

Spencer bent and kissed her bare shoulder.

"Mon enfant, ma sœur, songe à la douceur d'aller là-bas vivre ensemble . . . là tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, luxe, calme et volupté."

"That's what I mean," said Helen. "This is *là-bas*. Oh, Tony, if only we could . . ." She waved her hand vaguely in the air.

They drank two dry Martinis at the bar by the Library before moving towards the Hall for supper.

"I'm terribly proud of you," Spencer said. "I adore your porcelain nose. But you're not only the most beautiful woman here; you're also the best dressed."

"Is that important? I want to look beautiful for you, to be well dressed, to please you. But if I weren't well dressed? Would it matter?"

"Yes," said Spencer. "I wouldn't be as proud of you as I am. My ego would be deflated. I couldn't have the same pride of conquest. I'd have to shrink in front of anyone with a more beautiful and better-dressed woman."

Helen held his arm more tightly.

"It's lucky," she said, "I don't love you for your character."

Under the picture of Henry VIII straddling the floor with his heavy legs, they ate cold chicken and drank a bottle and a half of Heidsieck Dry Monopole.

"I don't want to go home," Helen said again. She had said it nine times during supper. "I don't want to go home. What's the time?"

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"Twenty-five past two," said Spencer. "We must start back soon."

"Why?" said Helen. "I don't want to go back."

Spencer smiled and touched the light hair that had drooped over her face.

"We must, darling. I've got a Press Conference at eleven. I'm seeing your friend Erskine."

"I hate him," she said, and put her face on Spencer's shoulder. "Let's stay here, Tony. Or let's run away somewhere."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Bangkok, Cythera, Brighton, anywhere. Would you come, Tony? Would you? Would you?"

Spencer put his arm around her. "Would you give up your exquisite flat and your country house and what is it—the Vaughan Trust—and five or six thousand a year? Even for Cythera?"

"Why not?"

"Because it rains in Cythera. Every other day. And there's nowhere to dry the clothes. And everyone huddles on the shore waiting to re-embark."

"But I mean it, Tony," she said, looking at him sombrely from eyes slightly bloodshot through lack of sleep. "Why shouldn't we? Wouldn't you come away with me? I'm ~~so~~ tired of casual meetings, and being afraid. Looking over our shoulders the whole time to see if there's anyone we know, meeting in out-of-the-way restaurants, art-galleries, parks. Having to choose between love-making or shopping in the afternoon. Dodging past the doors in Marsham Street. I want to be with you the whole time, to be able to wake up and see you. Put my hand out to you in the night and touch you. Wouldn't you come away with me?"

"For good?"

"Yes, for good."

"That would make three husbands."

"You're being foul. You know about my first husband. I married him when I was eighteen."

"I don't know anything about him—except that he was

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rich, like your second husband. It's no good. I can't compete."

"But you do know about him, and you're not competing with either. I'd only been home from Switzerland for about four weeks. Till then it had been easy. I was being educated with the money that Daddy had left, but I'd no idea how my mother was living. Three weeks of Kensington Private Hotels' and I would have married anyone. He was an old friend of the family. The whole thing was pathetic and absurd."

"But convenient?"

"Life became rather easier then. We knew lots and lots of people. Mummy had known Geraint Vaughan rather well when I was a child, and it was through him that she got to know so many politicians. I used to adore him with that white moustache of his. He always used to bring me a spray of flowers when he came to the house, and he'd give them to me as if I were very grown-up. Then Mummy died during the war, and I joined the M.T.C., and that's how I came to meet John, whom I hadn't seen for years. I saw him one day when I delivered a Brigadier to the House."

Spencer said, "Yes. It was decent of Vaughan to stick to his seat, even for so short a time. He sacrificed a military career for the sake of his constituents."

"You're jeering," she said.

"Oh, no, not a bit. I'm fascinated. Please go on, Helen."

"Well, strangely enough, I liked John because of his father. I know it sounds rather absurd, but it's true. When we met again, I always remembered his father's firm, self-assured voice, and Mummy laughing, and the funny little squiggle I used to get when he brought me his posies. . . ."

"Yes," said Spencer.

"Well, you know all the rest. The divorce, and John's resignation."

"You didn't expect that?"

"No. When I was a girl I'd always had a dream of being a great hostess in London, orchestrating the brilliant con-

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versation of Ministers and Ambassadors—having a drawing-room that would be a meeting-place of very famous and exciting people.”

“It sounds like a nightmare after an overdose of Trollope.”

“Perhaps it was. At any rate, it never happened. John gave up his seat, and got some sort of job with the Minister for Middle East Affairs in Cairo. After the war we went to Pelling——”

“The Old Man wouldn’t have survived it.”

“Neither could John. Coming back to his father’s house had a queer effect on him.”

“Was he . . . ?”

“No. Nothing like that. He became peculiar—strange. Before we were married, he’d seemed—I told you—like his father. Resolute and carefree. At Pelling he became morose—idle and dependent.”

“Didn’t you love him when you married him?”

“I liked him—very much. But then—it was as if I were imprisoned. He had nothing to do except follow and watch me. It was horrible, pathological. And what was worse, I began to loathe his contact.”

Spencer lit himself a cigarette.

“How do you think he’d feel if he knew about us?” he asked, looking at her through the smoke.

“I know how he’d feel,” she said. “I don’t know what he’d do.”

“I don’t think I want to find out,” said Spencer. “The important thing is that he’s going to win Cwmbrau.”

“What about it?”

“You must sink back into respectability. It’s the least you can do for him. Be patient till he’s won it and he’s back in the House. You’ll feel differently then.”

She began to take another glass of champagne. Spencer put his hand on hers.

“It’s all right, Tony,” she said, shaking it off. “I’m not going to disgrace you. Cwmbrau is a sobering thought.”

But later, when they went down the steps towards the

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river, she felt dizzy and leant against him with her eyes shut. Spencer stood still, stroked her head without speaking, and kissed her lightly on her mouth.

"We'll walk slowly," he said. "And we'll take a punt."

The temperature had fallen and he wrapped her fur coat round her shoulders.

Close to the wall of Queen's College, sheltered by a willow-tree, they lay together on the cushions of the punt. A faint percussion in the night air, a pulse without sound, reached them from the Trinity Ball. Occasionally a canoe with voices splashed by. But otherwise around them was an enclosing silence that doubly screened them within the pendant branches.

"I'm so content with you," said Helen, stirring her mouth on Spencer's, but not taking it away. "I'm so incomplete without you. I was getting tight before. I'm terribly sorry, darling. You weren't angry?"

"No, I liked it. Are you still?"

"Yes, a bit. But it's different."

"How different?"

"Well, it's drowsy and secure. And when I shut my eyes, things don't go round and round. I simply drift. I love you very much. I'm so incomplete without you. Why don't you ever say you love me?"

Spencer drew away a fraction of an inch.

"Oh, no, come back. It's just that it's so wonderful here, with you, away from everyone."

She began to cry.

"Don't cry," Spencer said.

After a few moments Helen said, "I'm sorry, Tony. I love you. It makes me want to cry. That's all. Do you like Cambridge as much as I do?"

"I think so."

"Why, darling?"

"Because I first had a woman in Cambridge." He laughed in the darkness.

"What a wonderful reason! I can clear the Masters of

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Trinity rolling in their graves. Who was she, Tony? Do I know her?"

"No."

"I'm not jealous."

"There's no need to be. It was a long time ago. I was an undergraduate."

She put her hand inside his coat, and pressed herself to him.

"I was an undergraduate, and was coming back to Cambridge from Liverpool Street, the old L.N.E.R. It was in the autumn. The train was absolutely crammed, third class, about six aside and four standing. We pulled out at dusk, and it got darker and darker, but there were no lights. You couldn't read or do anything."

"I wish I'd known you when you were an undergraduate."

"You wouldn't have looked at me. I was a bewildered young man, straight from Dulwich."

"I would have adored you. Do you think I love you because you're successful?"

"Partly."

"No, not the least bit. I loved you the very first time I met you at Huberton. Because you were half-shy and half-aggressive, and took me for a walk while the others were talking politics. Oh, I don't know. Go on, darling. Tell me more."

"Well, there was a woman next to me, she must have been about twenty-eight or so, about eight years older than I was then. She wore a suit of some kind, and she had a tweed coat thrown over her knees. Not beautiful, but fresh and clear and pleasing. She had the most lovely hands. Like yours. Exquisite, small almond-shaped nails and long fingers. She sat without moving, absolutely still."

"And then?"

"Then suddenly somebody opened the window, and a cold draught blew in from the fens. Somebody else said, 'Shut that window!' and everyone laughed. But the woman, threw her coat over me without a word or a smile. My hands

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were underneath it. I was close to her. I could feel the warmth of her body."

"And then?"

"The back of my hand touched hers. I would have taken it away, but I felt paralysed. She didn't take hers away, and I began to shiver. Then, without moving a muscle of her face, and looking straight ahead, she took my hand in hers and held it on her thigh till we got to Cambridge."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No. Not a word. That was the strange and exciting thing about it. We didn't say a word till we got to the taxis. She was the wife of a don, who was somewhere at a conference. She took me to their rooms in one of the roads to Girton. She had a gas ring. We had tea-cakes. . . . And afterwards she cried."

"It's a mistake to cry afterwards. The time to cry is before. Afterwards is lovely. Stay close to me, darling."

When the first glimmer of dawn came, undergraduates on the Backs began to release hydrogen-filled yellow balloons that rose like fraudulent suns above the colleges. One burst into flames above Queens', and in its light Helen saw the dark lines under Spencer's eyes, and his pallid face.

"We must go, Tony," she said. "You're so tired."

"Not yet. Soon. Helen?"

"Yes."

"I want you to tell me something. Something that I want to know very much."

He was talking to her with his lips on her neck.

"Close your eyes," he said, "and tell me something."

"What is it, Tony?"

"I promise—I swear I'll never ask you again. But I must know. It torments me."

"What is it, darling? I promise I'll tell you, if I know the answer."

He was lazily caressing her neck as he spoke.

"I want you to tell me about yourself and Erskine."

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"Oh, Tony!"

"I want to know," he said fiercely. "You must tell me." And then he went on, his voice becoming gentle. "I swear to you that it will make no difference. I only want to know for myself."

"But surely—surely you're not jealous?"

"Of course I'm not jealous. I just want to know. Are you going to tell me or not?" His voice became harder.

Helen opened her eyes, and looked at him hesitantly. He went on stroking her with his finger and thumb, a mechanical, rhythmical motion.

"Darling," she said. "I'll tell you, if you swear . . ."

"I swear it will make no difference."

"All right, I'll tell you. But do you really swear?"

"Oh, God!" He pushed her away.

"No, come back, Tony." She drew him close to her again.

"I will tell you. I've known Michael for years, almost as long as I've known John. There was never anything between us—ever—except friendship. And when it happened . . ."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, it was almost an accident."

"When was it? After you'd married John?"

"Yes, about two years afterwards. We had a party. Jane couldn't come. John was tired. He'd pressed Michael to stay the night. John went to bed. Some of us stayed behind and danced. And then they went. The whole thing's dreadfully banal . . ."

"I know, the divan, the fag-ends and the dirty glasses."

"You make it sound so horrid."

"Wasn't it?"

"No, not at the time."

"And after that?"

"I don't know. It was difficult—inconvenient. We met three or four times. Then we both decided . . ."

"You both decided . . ."

"Yes, we both decided that we should stop."

"And the last time? How long ago?"

"When Michael came back from Greece during the war

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—once—and that was after a party. Tony, what's the matter? Darling," her voice rose in anxiety, "you promised! You swore."

Spencer had taken up the punt pole and was driving it savagely into the gravel of the river bed. The willow leaves swept Helen's face as the punt swung into the stream.

"Tony, you promised!"

He didn't answer, but urged the punt forward towards Trinity, his face locking his unhappiness.

"But, Tony, you promised it would be all right if I told you. You swore it would be."

Rockets were beginning to burst in elaborate cadenzas over the lawns, and the braziers were already dying. The enthusiastic voices of the earlier night were now relaxed; the faces of the dancers were sallow in the early dawn. Spencer edged the punt through the litter of discarded canoes and punts that drifted off the mooring steps. Without looking at her, he helped Helen ashore, and from there he walked in silence, while she—at his side—kept repeating, "But, Tony, you promised!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

An Information

"WHAT ABOUT ALDERLY?"

"Not a chance. He's nearly sixty-seven already. If the P.M. were to die, there's no one except Broughton and Erskine. And Erskine's nearly twenty years younger than Broughton."

"Well, if the P.M. hangs on another three years—Broughton's thoroughly unpopular—say he becomes Privy Seal?—he's got diabetes anyway—what's to stop Erskine?"

"I'll tell you," said Manningham, the eldest of the eight political correspondents sitting round the long mahogany table in the Minister's ante-room. Thompson, the younger correspondent, who had suggested Alderley as a future Prime Minister, listened courteously. Manningham was a reverend commentator who remembered every item of political gossip in Fleet Street for the last forty years.

"Erskine's indiscriminate. After all, a politician can't choose his friends. But he ought to be careful to choose his enemies. The trouble with Erskine is that almost everyone likes him, and no one loves him. On the whole, British Prime Ministers have to be the sort of man you can trust with your eldest daughter or your sister or your wife or mother—a sort of father-figure. A man you'd shoot tigers with. Erskine's not that stuff. You can like him for this or for that. You can admire him. He'll get the biggest audience of any politician in the country except Morgan. But the closer you get to him, the thinner he becomes, until all at once you reach a limit, and there's another Erskine, a private one that no one knows, except, I suppose, his wife. And I'm not so sure

about her either. That won't do at all for the British public. They like to know their Prime Ministers."

"Don't exaggerate, Manny," said Spencer, without turning round. He was standing at the window looking out at St. James's Park. "A Prime Minister's rather like a Lord Mayor. He's made by the job. He's moulded into its chains. That's why you get small business-men, big business-men, little solicitors and great aristocrats all following each other like ball-bearings. Of course the British public like to know their Prime Minister. But what they know is a myth. It's the same with every politician."

He came to the table and took a chair. "Every politician," he went on, "has a *Doppelgänger*."

"A what?" said Thompson.

"It's O.K.," said another journalist. "Tony's testing us for culture."

"A double," said Spencer. "Not a dual personality, that's something spontaneous. I mean a double *persona*, the one he is to his constituents and the public, and the one he is to his pillow. The public one is the bowdlerised version. All the swear words and the dirty bits have been taken out. His private *persona*——"

"I don't think so," said Manningham. He spoke slowly and deliberately, in contrast to the urgency in Spencer's voice. "After all, in public we all civilise our behaviour—we edit our personality. Which of us would say, if it were possible, 'Come on, chaps, take a look into my skull and see what I really feel and think, and what I did yesterday'? Would you, Tony?"

Spencer grinned. "Not if I could help it," he said.

The brass-studded outer door of the Minister's room opened, and one of the private secretaries, a pale young man with flaxen hair well brushed, said, "The Minister has asked me to apologise for keeping you waiting. He's had to fit in an overseas visitor. You know how it is, these things are rather unpredictable."

The journalists murmured sympathetically.

"It's one of the chores," said Thompson.

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"I beg your pardon?" said the private secretary.

"I mean, it's pretty strenuous welcoming foreign visitors and deputations . . ."

"Press conferences," said Manningham, "official dinners, official lunches, trade exhibitions, trade delegations . . . it's a rough life."

The private secretary smiled graciously. He was leaning against the wall with one thumb in his waistcoat pocket, a *pastiche* of the Erskine Manner.

"My Minister takes it all in his stride. He has a remarkable talent for doing difficult things easily."

A buzzer sounded, and he hurried to open the door. A short man in a brown suit came quickly out, holding a pigskin brief-case under his arm.

"The Minister is ready, gentlemen," said the private secretary; and the correspondents followed him single file into the Minister's room, led by Manningham—all except Spencer, who at the outer door turned away as if by a late impulse, and made quickly for the door that led to the staircase.

The man in the brown suit walked cautiously down the broad stone steps that led to the entrance. On the landing, he hesitated and looked round him before moving on. At the exit a porter stopped him, and asked for his pass.

"Never had a thing," said Curtis.

The porter had begun to argue that no one could either enter or leave the building without a pass when Spencer came up and said, "It's all right, Peters. I know this gentleman. He's a friend of Mr. Erskine."

"Well, it's against the regulations," said the porter, but he waved Curtis on.

"Now, that was very nice of you, sir," said Curtis, as they walked into Whitehall.

"Oh, not a bit of it," said Spencer. "I'm only too glad to help. Anyhow, for one moment I thought we might have met before."

Curtis said, "Could be."

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"I'm a journalist, a lobby correspondent. Anthony Spencer."

"What do you know?" said Curtis in polite surprise. "I'm a lobby man too. Collindale, Westover Collindale."

They shook hands as they walked.

"Now where could we have met?" Spencer asked. "House of Commons?"

"Could be."

"Washington?"

"It's where I live."

"You wouldn't know a fellow called Curtis by any chance? Hendfyk Curtis?"

"No," said Curtis decisively. "Should I know him?"

"Well, I thought you might," said Spencer. "There was a half-page picture of him in *Life* a fortnight ago. He was giving evidence before the Senate Committee, you know."

"Is that so," said Curtis. "I must have missed it."

"It doesn't matter. It'll probably catch up with you."

They had stopped on the pavement by the Cenotaph, and the mid-day crowds round them parted like a stream that meets a stone.

"A friend of mine at the American Embassy rang me yesterday to say that Mr. Curtis is over here. On business."

Curtis frowned, and then smiled meekly. "Now, if that isn't interesting!" he said. "I think we're holding up the traffic."

"Yes," said Spencer. "Let's have a drink, Mr. Curtis."

They had been sitting in the White Hart for ten minutes. Curtis was idly twisting the stem of his tomato-juice glass as he ended his story. Spencer, who had already drunk a double whisky, ordered a second.

"It's fascinating," said Spencer. "Absolutely fascinating. It would be the best news story since 1945. Wonderful! The only drawback is that no one will believe it."

"No," said Curtis in a melancholy voice. "No one would believe it."

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"Not without evidence."

"Not without evidence!"

"Where was Scott-Palmer, his P.P.S., his Parliamentary Private Secretary?"

"The fellow with the droopy look and the watch-chain?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he's no good. He was home in bed."

"But surely someone saw all this going on. Someone must have seen the game, seen the money passing."

"I'll never understand the English," said Curtis. "How can those men there stand and stand and drink beer?"

"Never mind that," said Spencer. "I asked you a question."

"Please, Mr. Spencer," said Curtis in his soft voice. "Don't be so abrupt. You'll frighten me. And then I'll go away—and you'll have no story at all, not even a small one."

He tugged down his jacket that had slowly been riding upwards. Spencer began to speak, but Curtis interrupted him.

"Hold it a moment. I'm speaking. I'm ready to do business if your paper wants to. For a thousand pounds I'm ready to sell you an original affidavit confirming that Erskine borrowed two thousand seven hundred dollars from me and he then lost in a roulette game."

"What's the value of the affidavit? What's the signature worth?"

"It's worth a thousand pounds. It's Lady Applebourne's. Like to see the photostat?"

He drew an envelope from his pocket, broke the seal, and holding its contents in his hand showed them to Spencer, who asked, "Doesn't it make your fingers burn?"

"Sure," said Curtis, without changing his tone. "They burn. But not as much as Mr. Erskine's going to burn. He's given me the run-around ever since I first met him. 'It's frightfully nice. . . . It's frightfully important. . . . I'm frightfully pure.' " Curtis mimicked Erskine's voice. " 'That will

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be all, Curtis. This interview's over.' O.K., so it's over. Perhaps it's only beginning. I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Spencer. If you have many more like Mr. Erskine, it's no wonder you're losing the Empire."

The two men were silent, till Spencer said, "It's a big thing, a bit too big for me to handle alone. I'd better get on to my editor, and he'd better talk to my lord and master."

"Before you do that," said Curtis, "do you know Morgan?"

"Yes."

"How about me meeting him?"

"I could arrange it."

"Well, let's try it on him first. It's always good to take a consumer-test."

Spencer went to the telephone box and rang Morgan.

At ten-fifteen that evening the Smoking Room of the House of Commons was crowded. The Government had had an unexpectedly large majority after a difficult debate on transport, in which Morgan had been singularly passionate and aggressive. When he had come into the Chamber with his chin jutting for his winding-up speech everyone had known that this was going to be one of his eviscerating evenings.

"I will tear out the right honourable Gentleman's political guts and consult the omens," he had once said to a Prime Minister when he was a young back-bencher. The Prime Minister had replied with an eighteenth-century formality, "The honourable Gentleman claims vatic qualities. I have no doubt that in the ancient groves from which he sprang some priest was his progenitor. But with the movement of time, the antique gift has deserted him. And all I see before me is one engarlanded with offal like some suburban butcher."

Morgan's attack had been directed this evening against Broughton. "Perhaps," he had ended, "the Government has no substitute for the right honourable Gentleman. Perhaps it

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has run out of the pasteboard scenery with which it disguises its decrepit background. But let's have an end to it. This stuttering farce must stop. I beg to move——"

Broughton rose to reply without a glance at Morgan. He congratulated a Maiden Speaker. He apologised, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, for his apparent intrusion into the sphere of transport. Then he turned to Morgan. "The right honourable Gentleman," he said, "has made a passionate speech. He has wooed what he hopes is a receptive electorate with an ardour as intense as I believe it to be synthetic. Indeed, I hope that the right honourable Gentleman will not be offended if I describe him politically as a seducer—a Lothario—as far as the bedside."

He paused for his supporters' laughter to die down. "Mark you, sir," Broughton continued, addressing the Speaker, "the right honourable Gentleman is possibly suffering from the chagrin he would be less than human not to feel, because of his recent discomforture over the American Agreement at the hands of my right honourable Friend." He pointed to Erskine. "But the right honourable Gentleman must not confuse his personal griefs with those of the nation. As one who in his early days was a physician, may I be permitted to counsel patience, and—er—rest."

The Government Members, drinking whisky-and-soda at the far end of the Smoking Room near the serving hatch, were delighted with their success. They surrounded Erskine and Broughton, relaxed on the heavy leather settees and arm-chairs in a mood of self-approbation. By the window Morgan, too, was sitting in his customary arm-chair with a group of his immediate friends and followers listening to him attentively. Between the two circles was a marsh of scattered Members, the elderly, the obscure, the dignified and the isolated—those who in some way failed to qualify for either grouping—drinking a final drink and reading the crumpled evening papers before leaving for home.

"I had the most astonishing experience at Merchison on Saturday morning," said Erskine. "I'd been doing my

'surgery'—you know, the usual queue of pensions and housing——"

"Never seems to get less," said Dangerfield.

"I've given up housing cases," said Eveleigh-Brown, a young back-bencher, from the periphery. "I put an announcement in the local paper that they're a matter for the Council."

"What were you saying, Michael?" said Broughton, moving his chair and offering Eveleigh-Brown a little more of his shoulder.

"Oh, it's not important," said Erskine, half apologetically. "I was saying that I was doing my 'surgery' and there were about six people in the waiting-room when in came a man who looked like a farmer—a big, roistering sort of chap—tweeds and old leather."

"Sound like a commuting stockbroker," said Dangerfield.

"No, this one was the real thing. I could smell subsidies a mile off."

"But they've just had one lot," said Broughton. "If the farmers go on like this, it'll soon be hard to know who's biting the hand that's feeding whom."

"Well, this fellow didn't want to talk politics. He came in, said good-morning in a tremendous boom, and then dropped his voice, looked round him"—Erskine acted the part of the farmer—"and said, 'Anyone here?' in a sort of mysterious whisper."

"He probably wanted to sell you the secrets of the Farmers' Union," said Dangerfield.

"Not a bit of it," said Erskine. "He said, 'Look at me.' I looked at him, and he seemed quite ordinary. 'See anything strange?' he asked. I told him I couldn't see anything strange. 'Look at my forehead,' he said, staring straight into my eyes. 'Can you see the tusk? The tusk in the middle of my forehead?'"

"Good Lord," said Eveleigh-Brown. "I'd have fled."

"I merely said 'Oh!' or something equally harmless. Whereupon he said, 'I can't get rid of it. Seen three

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specialists. Anything you can do?" I sat there petrified," Erskine went on. "Then he said, 'Touch it!' and came round the table. So, to humour him, I touched his forehead and said, 'Would you like me to write to the Minister of Health about it?' And he said, 'Yes, that's a good idea. But don't mention my name.' And with that he put his hat on and cleared off."

Erskine's audience laughed loudly.

"Serves you right for being too conscientious," said Dangerfield. "The trouble with you young men is that you've made Members of Parliament into Welfare Officers."

"Oh, rubbish," said Broughton. "The only M.P.s who complain about being Welfare Officers are those who miss the old alternative of being nothing at all but the speechless lobby-fodder of three-line whips."

"Don't be too hard on them," said the Chief Whip. "They keep us all alive. If they do as well as they did today, I see no reason why we shouldn't go the whole time. No technical reason."

"How many were we up tonight?" asked Broughton.

"Sixty-seven," said the Chief Whip, his heavy face glistening in personal triumph. "They simply evaporated."

"What do you think, Michael?" Broughton asked.

"I really don't know," Erskine replied. "It depends, I think, on Cwmbrau. If we hold Cwmbrau . . ."

"Of course we'll hold it," said Broughton. "Morgan couldn't have made a bigger mistake than to put Vaughan up in a place like that. Do you really think they're going to vote for a co-respondent?"

"It's a long time ago."

"Well, they haven't forgotten. And if they have, Wynne will remind them."

"Oh, come," said Erskine. "You don't seriously mean that. You wouldn't drag that up."

"I didn't say I would. I said that Wynne would. Wynne is one of the most experienced in-fighters in the Party."

The others laughed, but Erskine was silent.

"Cwmbrau isn't going to be as easy as you think," said Sir Geoffrey Vincent, the Home Secretary, who had joined them. He spoke with scarcely a movement of his lips. "Not after this evening. It was more than a riot. It was a demonstration."

"I saw it on the tape," said Erskine. "How did it all start. You don't have a whole village turning on two men."

The Home Secretary ordered himself a drink. "I've had a report," he said. "It began absurdly, as these things do. There were a couple of girls, you know, the usual thing, camp-followers. They'd been hanging around the troops."

"I didn't know there were any there," said Gascoigne. "I thought they were all civilian workers."

"Oh, no," said the Home Secretary. "There's quite a few guarding the base. I was saying; this afternoon these girls were found in the camp itself. A patrol found them with some G.I.s . . ."

"In the barracks?"

"Why not? They're always smuggling women into prisons in America," said Evelyn-Brown.

The Home Secretary continued. "The women—girls—they're only sixteen or so—were put into a jeep with a couple of American policemen who had orders to take them out of Cwmbrau and dump them somewhere."

"That was stupid," said Erskine. "How on earth can anyone defend that?"

"Well," said the Home Secretary, "nobody does defend it, not even the Commanding Officer, because it's there the trouble began. There was the usual crowd of children and loafers outside the camp gates. They must have heard the excitement, shouts and screaming, I suppose, and the story went about Cwmbrau—it's only a small place—that the Americans had got hold of two Welsh girls and raped them in the camp. By the time the Military Police jeep came out there was a mob of several hundred outside. They blocked the main road into Cwmbrau, so that the jeep couldn't pass."

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"They should have taken the girls back," said Gascoigne.

"If they'd done that," said the Home Secretary, "the crowd would probably have burnt the camp down. We had nine police ourselves on the spot, and they were almost helpless. At any rate, the Americans reversed the jeep and took the road up the mountain side, with the whole mob of people swarming round to cut them off. Somehow or other the girls got away, or were thrown out after about a mile. You can imagine them—weeping, nylons torn, chewing gum desiccated."

"Why didn't they let the Americans go?" asked Erskine.

"They did. They blocked the road back so that the jeep had to go right up the mountain. By that time the mist had come up. That's how it was the jeep went over the quarry."

They drank their whisky without speaking till the Prime Minister approached with his absorbed, shuffling walk. He was frowning, and the Chief Whip hurried to appease him by yielding to him his customary place on the leather settee.

"It's very unsatisfactory," said the Prime Minister. They all waited politely for the context. "I've just seen the tape. A hundred and seventy-nine for six after being a hundred and thirty for one. I simply can't understand why Warwickshire's been crumbling so badly this season. Do you know why?" he asked the Home Secretary.

"No, sir," said the Home Secretary. "I must confess cricket isn't my game, and my county, in any case, is Westmorland."

"That explains it," said the Prime Minister.

"Warwickshire's had a lot of injuries this year," said Eveleigh-Brown.

The Prime Minister looked at him as if to ask, 'Are you a Member?' and then, deciding that he was, said, "Ah, yes, a lot of injuries. Crocks *et praeterea nihil*." He laughed to himself at his jest, and ignoring the others, put his hand on Erskine's shoulder.

"Michael," he said in a private voice, "I'm glad you're

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speaking at Cwmbrau on Friday. I don't like the way things are going there. We can't have the election fought on the theme of 'Should' girls be raped and G.I.s pushed over quarries! *

"No, sir," said Erskine. "But that's how it's shaping. They'll use this as an excuse to cultivate every mean and unworthy prejudice they can inject the public mind with. This anti-Americanism of theirs isn't a process of reason. It's a bacillus that attacks the brain cells."

The Prime Minister frowned, lowering his brows till his eyes were almost hidden, and fell into a muse. The others waited for him to begin again.

"I've asked the Office to make the arrangements," he continued. "I'm particularly anxious for you to speak there. Bring the question into focus. Put this . . ." he groped for the word, "this squabble, into perspective. *Sub specie aeternitatis*. And see that the Press Association gets your speech in good time."

"I will, sir."

The Prime Minister rose, mumbled "Good-night," and went out, audibly grumbling to himself, "Morgan . . . *vox et praeterea nihil*."

As soon as he was out of earshot, Eveleigh-Brown said, "What a wonderful old man! If I had a tenth of his faculties when I'm his age, I'd be more than delighted."

The Chief Whip said, "If you had a tenth of his faculties at any age, my dear boy, you'd surprise us all."

"It's quite extraordinary, the hard brilliance of his intellect," said the Home Secretary, who wanted to stand well with the Chief Whip. "It's precisely his clarity of mind, those sudden illuminations of spirit, that have given him that . . . that mastery in the Party for nearly twenty years."

"Yes," said Erskine. "He has intervals of remarkable lucidity."

He finished his drink, and went.

"What's up with Erskine?" asked Smedley, a plump solicitor who was sitting at Morgan's right elbow. They

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followed Erskine with their eyes as he pushed his way past the tables and the outstretched legs towards the door.

Quayle, on the other side of Morgan, said, "Erskine's all right. He's probably fed up over the Treasury. But he's going to Washington all the same."

"Who told you?" said Morgan, pausing with his glass to his mouth.

"It's on the tape," said Quayle. "It's the new loan. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing much," said Morgan reflectively. "Except that somehow or other Mr. Erskine may think twice about going to Washington."

"I don't see why you're so reluctant to take American money," said Smedley in his rapid, popping voice. "It's a simple proposition. The Americans regard Europe as their first bulwark, and the British as their principal mercenaries. They think of us as we thought of the Dutch and the Belgians and even the French in the last fifty years. When we were powerful, they didn't like us. Now that we're no longer a danger, they like us. After all, the French only stopped being Frogs and started being our gallant allies when they became weaker than the Huns. And the Huns only stopped being Huns and Nazis when they became weaker than the Russkis. Did any of them ever refuse our money? Not on your life. I'm all for taking every dollar. The Opposition has a clear duty. It's to vote against American Aid, and to grab it with both hands."

"You'd better take care, Frank," said Quayle. "I'll send that to your constituents."

"You wouldn't do that," said Smedley. "Everything said in the Smoking Room is privileged. It's always kept within the strict bounds of the national Press."

"Any of you know a chap called Curtis?" Morgan asked.

"Oberon Curtis, the statistician," said a junior Whip on the outer ring, who, since by the custom of his office he was limited in Parliament to phrases like, "I beg to move . . ."

or "Monday, sir," had almost lost the capacity for consecutive speech and now balanced this inhibition with emphatic announcements of special knowledge.

"No, no," said Morgan contemptuously. "Hendryk Curtis—the Senate Committee fellow." He smiled to himself. "Spencer brought him to see me."

"That's a very suitable pair," said Smedley. "Spencer knows all the lice in the political underseams. What did he want?"

Morgan stretched himself against the back of his chair and said, "Nothing much. All he wanted was to know how to commit political murder."

"You told him of course."

"I asked him whom he wanted to murder."

"Who was it?"

"Erskine."

"That all?"

"That's all. He wanted to know whether he could liquidate Mr. Erskine without liquidating the Government. He was very sensitive on that point. He thought it would be highly improper for a citizen of the United States to interfere in British politics."

The heads leaned forward conspiratorially. Morgan was drinking his whisky-and-soda, and they waited, but he said nothing.

"What exactly did he want?" Smedley said at last.

"He asked me if I knew that Erskine owed him two thousand dollars. Two or three thousand. I've forgotten which."

"And you didn't?"

"I said I didn't. He then asked me if it was ethical for a British statesman to borrow money from an American business man. I said to him that it was as ethical or unethical for a Briton to borrow money from an American as for Britain to borrow money from America."

"But not so legal," said Smedley.

"Nor so tactful," said Quayle.

"He then said something rather more interesting," said

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Morgan. "Curtis mentioned that he was a business consultant with some of the biggest accounts in the States, including the United Middleton Machine Tool Corporation."

"Good Lord!" said Quayle. "They're the chosen instrument in the Anglo-American Agreement."

The whole group became silent.

"Someone ought to put down a Question," said Smedley.

"A Motion," said Quayle.

"On what?" Morgan interrupted.

"Well, on the relationship between the Agreement and Erskine's loan."

"How do you know there was a loan?" Morgan asked.

"You've just said there was."

"No, I didn't, I didn't, I didn't! I said Curtis said that Erskine owed him money. Would you be prepared to put down a question on the hearsay of a crook? Do you think the Table would accept it unless you took responsibility for the truth of it? Would you be ready to do it?"

"How do you know he's a crook?" Smedley asked. "Not every business consultant is. Crooks call themselves that just as tarts call themselves mannequins and models and dance hostesses."

"You're talking daft," said Morgan. "This one's a real crook. He offered to sell an affidavit to the Party, proving the debt. He wanted a thousand pounds for it."

"What did you say?"

"I gave him a lecture on British politics. I said to him, 'Mr. Curtis, we are not political assassins in our country. We don't win our debates by smearing and besmirching our opponents till they crawl into their holes, afraid of God's own sun.' " He began to declaim. " 'We don't damn a man because he once met a criminal, or prove him guilty because of an association. We don't hire detectives to follow Ministers of the Crown. Nor do we arrange, when we have the power, to tap each other's telephones. We have no funds for espionage, suborning or blackmail. Where we have a charge, we make it openly, in the Press, in the Courts or in debate. That is where we purge ourselves of what's insanitary in

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our political life. That's where we achieve our political catharsis.' "

He bent forward towards Quayle, angry and denouncing, as though Quayle were Curtie himself.

"What did he say to that?" asked Quayle.

"He asked me if I meant a thousand was too much."

"Well?"

"I told him the facts of life in a few words. He then said, 'Do you buy or don't you?' I said that there's a special kind of political indecency that I'd rather leave to Spencer, his boss and their Sunday paper."

"What did they say to that?"

"Not a word. They thought I'd made a joke. At any rate, I showed them the door and they went out laughing."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conversations at Night

ERSKINE AWOKE, AND listened fearfully to the utter silence.

So it had been years before on the sea-bed in the submarine, motors switched off, in quietness after the depth-charge growl and rumble, waiting for the upper waters to clear. Four miles from Tsirmilos the submarine waited for the last three men on the island. He slid from the dinghy, and clutched the greasy metal flank, and slid and drowned. *Phlebas the Phœnician a fortnight dead forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell and the profit and the loss.*

Drowned in a gurgle of water and mumbling voices and the torchlights, he awakened then in the terror of utter silence, his soggy uniform warmed in blankets, a diesel heat and smell. "One of the last from the Greek islands," they told him, when he awoke from drowning; and at Alexandria the Brigadier spoke of a Military Cross.

The window panes of his bedroom seemed opaque yellow till he saw, distinguishing them in the shadows, that they were the reflection on the wall of the real windows, translucent with moonlight, in a pattern of dove-grey clouds and darker trees. The dressing-table, the glass of the Daumier print, the lamp by the bedside, the face of his sleeping wife, took shape and familiarity. And only a metronome, the beat of his heart, reminded him of the sea-bed and the submarine. *A current undersea picked his bones in whispers.* He turned to the window to feel the drift of air, then he lay staring at the pale oblong of the ceiling. He began again the argument with himself that had kept him restless since he had met Curtis in the Central Lobby.

"The honourable and gallant Gentleman," said the Prime Minister when he made his maiden speech, "is distinguished by his record, and our company is adorned by his presence." The obligatory illusion. The honourable and gallant Gentleman whose record we all know. The honourable Gentleman, reinforced by his remarkable war record. The right honourable Gentleman whom we congratulate on his new appointment, and whose achievement in peace as in war has been outstanding. The Old Man had been very kind to him. And in America two months before. Date of birth, place, job. Michael Erskine. Minister for Economic Co-operation. War Hero Minister Slates Production Drag.

After the Agreement was initialled in Washington, Erskine flew with his two secretaries and Charles to New York. The hot, damp city of Washington. In the air-conditioned room of the Treasury Department his jacket clung to him coldly, moist with the sweat of the few paces from his car to the corridors. The Americans sat in their shirt-sleeves, at ease.

A hundred million dollars of equipment for machine tool factories. The United Middleton Machine Tool Corporation undertakes to build and supply the equipment, and provide technical personnel for a machine tool complex at Cwmbrau. Around the reddish obeché table they drank large Old Fashioneds—Calshaw, Senator Operman, Vic Lester of the United Engineers, Delfiglio and some of the technical staff. Curtis came in later.

He had only spoken to Curtis twice. In New York the day after the agreement was signed in Washington, and the next day. On the bedcovers Erskine counted off the arguments with his fingers, and settled back on his pillow, shutting his eyes. As soon as he had done so, he began the argument again. With his left hand he pulled the bedside drawer open, quietly in order not to disturb his wife, took out his torch, and shone it on his wrist-watch. The time was two-twenty.

When he lay on his left side with his ear on the pillow, it was as though he were listening to a distant clock, ticking

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the seconds with each heart-beat. He turned on his right side, and shrivelled himself into the sheets. His heart now beat more lightly, faster. Faster than the breath of his wife, evenly breathing, her mouth half open, relaxed, her hair trailing over her face and the pillow, an exhausted sleep, her shoulder exposed and her left arm resting on the covers. Erskine watched her sleeping, and wanted to talk to her, to rouse her from the security of her unconsciousness and make her companionable to his own waking. He mumbled to himself, and turned over again on his left side, still smothering in a memory of the sea-bed, yet half alert and thinking about Curtis and tomorrow's speech. The pillow was hot and creased, and he altered its position. The thudding began again. He picked up his torch and looked at his watch. The time was two twenty-three.

"Oh, Christ!" he said aloud. He lay on his back and tried to close his eyes. But the conscious act of trying to close them made him wakeful. He looked at the ceiling, and into his thoughts came the warm afternoon at Hazelmere, before he went to America—Jane, the smell of dry grass—and then he fell asleep. When he awoke to a moment of hope that the night was over it was ten to three.

In the darkness he sat by the window, looking out over the balustrade at Hyde Park, where the street lamps of the Bayswater Road threw a glow on the under leaves of the chestnut trees. He remembered clearly how he had met Curtis. They had drinks at the Senator's apartment at the St. Regis. There were six or seven to begin with. Then others came in. Some American business men. American business men were like the Chinese. They all looked alike. How could anyone remember who was who?

They all looked alike except Curtis. You couldn't mistake Curtis. He was an act, a variety turn. He dressed like an Edwardian shop-walker. The cravat. The drooping moustache. The tight, three-button jacket. The narrow trousers. The boots. And the stick. For Curtis no one of importance had a surname, no one of unimportance a christian name. Even when Erskine mentioned the Secretary of State, Curtis

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recalled at that hint the summer he had spent with him in Michigan, and Hugh's dislike of fish-roe. Curtis was serviceable. He helped the Senator to put his jacket on, and the Senator hadn't thanked him.

They drove in three cars over the George Washington Bridge to Jersey. He went in Curtis's Cadillac, jammed against Lady Applebourne, whom he had met at a cocktail party. Charles Scott-Palmer stayed behind. Cautiously: "You carry on, Michael," he said. "I'm for b.t.d."

• He was sorry he'd taken Charles with him to America. A young Parliamentary Private Secretary had no right to speak like an elder statesman. Charles was in a hurry. He wanted the Under-Secretaryship, and even during their flight across the Atlantic, he couldn't stop talking about the vacant job.

"I won't pretend, Michael. I could do it well. You know, we feel the same way about things."

"In that case, you're feeling optimistic and sleepy. Pass me my brief-case."

"Yes, Michael. If I were you . . ."

Throughout the night, when he had wanted to read, Scott-Palmer had tugged at him with monologues, theories of Atlantic Federation, analyses of the Republican Party's attitude to farm prices and tariffs, appreciations of Europe's iron and steel prospects. Even after Erskine had asked the steward for another blanket, Scott-Palmer had murmured on in his even mashed voice, till Erskine had turned on his side, interrupting a sentence with a "Good-night," to watch the flaring exhaust-gases streaming from the engines as they flew onward over a wool-like sea of cirrus.

• It was a mistake bringing him. He couldn't stop advising his Minister. Erskine was glad he had persuaded the P.M. to choose Gascoigne for the Under-Secretaryship.

Lady Applebourne compressed him in a corner in the rouléte room, and talked about people he didn't know. Her ash-white hair and the vapours of cigar smoke mingled fantastically in front of Erskine's eyes. He excused himself, and washed his face inside a door marked "Milords." When he came out, Curtis was waiting for him, and they went

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to the tables together. Curtis played odds and evens, but Erskine had only ninety-seven dollars, and wanted to win or lose quickly. He played number ten for six throws and lost each time.

"Want some chips, Michael?" Curtis asked.

In the faint light Erskine peered at his watch close to his eyes. Five past three. His wife was sleeping with her face pressed into the pillows, making little moans like a dreaming dog. He looked at her resentfully and tenderly, and, standing by her bedside, pressed the pillow to disengage her face. She twisted abruptly awake.

"Oh, Michael," she said. "I was frightened. Why aren't you in bed?"

He sat next to her, and stroked her hair.

"It's nothing," he said, whispering so that she might fall asleep again. Now that she was awake, his resentment that she had slept was over. "Go to sleep."

"But why aren't you in bed?"

He went on smoothing her hair as she lay back with her eyes shut, her brow moist with the warmth of sleep.

"I couldn't sleep. It's nothing. Go to sleep."

She opened her eyes, and took his hand in hers.

"I've woken up," she said drowsily. "I'm awake. Let's put the light on and talk. I know why you can't sleep."

"Why?"

"They give you too much to do. Three speeches last week. Cwmbrau tomorrow. And the Constituency. It isn't fair. I'd rather have my husband well and happy than Prime Minister. This is the second night." She clung to his arm. "Michael, please, please tell me. Is it because I behaved like a stupid fool and told Spencer?"

"No, Jane. Forget all about that. All that is over and forgotten."

"Well, let's put the light on. I can't sleep now."

He stood up and said, "No, don't put the light on. I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's all right, darling."

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"No, I'm sorry. It's rotten being woken up like this. Go to sleep. I'm going to sit by the window for a bit."

She was sitting up in bed. "Michael," she said, "don't be irritable. I'm terribly sorry you can't sleep. I'm not angry with you. Only with the people who worry you so." She paused, and said thoughtfully, "I'd like to take each one of them and tear them to bits. Come back, darling. Come and lie next to me."

Between the window and the bed, feeling his way towards her side, he remembered again the evening after the Agreement.

"I'll stop off at my place," Curtis said, "if you don't mind. And you two can take my car on."

How old could Lady Applebourne have been? Anything between twenty-five and forty. Her thick and exquisitely tended eyebrows, the immaculate enamelled make-up of her face, the lips painted into a fashionable and moulded fullness. Beneath the veil that fell from her yellow straw hat, the composed expression. Glitter of ear-rings that clung to ears with scarcely any lobes. The graceful blue dress with the bouffant sleeves, the long white gloves on her forearms and the white linen coat. The shimmer of flesh through organdie. Her brilliant eyes touched up with parazidrine. After the moment of flattery, the hours of detachment and boredom. They had dropped Curtis, and he had seen Lady Applebourne to the door of her apartment. A pause at the lift, Lady Applebourne looking straight ahead urgently. Then the silent discussion that paralleled their abrupt conversation.

"Like a drink?"

"Well, I think I ought to be getting back."

"I mix a very good Tom Collins." Smiling teeth.

"It's terribly kind of you. I think I ought to be getting back."

"You're being difficult."

She went to pull back the cage of the lift, and he pulled it for her. She got in and looked out at him. The electric

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light which lit automatically as she trod on the centre of the floor shone directly on her red rimmed eyes.

"I really can't stay. You know, if ever I were to have a drink with a lovely woman at four in the morning, I would want it to be with you."

That, he thought to himself, was the votive offering.

He stretched out his hand, but she ignored it.

"In that case," she said, "don't forget, they want to see you tomorrow morning."

She pressed the button, rising quickly past the grill in a whirr and a fade-out of obscenities, his last sight of her, two thin legs stamping.

The next morning Curtis arrived at the hotel with Delfiglio, Senator Operman and Calshaw to say good-bye. Curtis handed him a packet of magazines, and, as he stood in the lounge waiting for Scott-Palmer to assemble the luggage, Curtis said in his soft, shy voice, "Don't bother about the other matter. Any time . . ."

"What other matter?"

"Last night." Operman and Scott-Palmer were coming towards them.

"Well, good-bye, Minister." General handshakes.

Shyly, "Any time will do. You weren't very lucky. Good-bye. Good trip."

"I don't . . ."

"Good-bye, Minister. Glad everything went off well. See you in England."

"Any time will do."

He had forgotten the whole thing till Curtis met him in the Central Lobby. He had wanted to forget it. It was past, an incident in travel like the passing landscape, the grinning and handshaking of every casual greeting.

"Why are you so restless, Michael?" his wife asked him as he lay by her side.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing at all."

"Is it something to do with the Agreement? Has anything gone wrong?"

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"No, nothing. There's nothing wrong, darling. Nothing at all."

"Then why are you so worried?" she persisted. "Tell me, darling. It'll be better if you tell me."

He was silent, and his mind fell into a half-sleep.

"I can't sleep," he replied. "I've been awake for hours . . ."

"Let me put the light on," she said. "Perhaps if you read, darling . . ."

"No. Let's lie here and talk."

In the darkness they spoke idly and intermittently, Jane drowsily, about Parliament and the constituency, her programme for the coming week, and Robert's holidays.

"What are you giving him for his birthday?" Jane asked.

"Twenty volumes of Hansard bound in blue," he answered.

They laughed, and were silent.

"I bought him an airgun," he said at last.

"Unoriginal," said Jane.

"I bought it at Harroley's. And who do you think I ran into?"

"Who?" She was awake now, and alert.

"Helen."

"Helen? Helen Vaughan?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" She lay in silence for a few moments. "Isn't it strange how that marriage has lasted?"

"Strange? Why strange?"

"She's really so utterly unlike John. Was she alone?"

"No."

"Whom was she with?"

"Spencer."

"You know, I thought there was something going on between those two at Huberton. How was she looking?"

"The same as always. Well dressed, pretty, vivacious—tired."

"You're only saying that to please me."

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"No. She looked like a doll, a very pretty doll that's stood in the window for a long time and faded."

"I'm so glad, darling. You used to like her so much."

"A long time ago."

"But still . . ."

"It's a long time ago. Even before I knew you."

Jane put her face on his shoulder. "I'm so glad you didn't marry her," she said in a drowse. "I wouldn't have liked it. I hate to think of you and Helen—or any other woman for that matter—anyone at all. I want you all to myself."

The sea swelled around him again.

"Jane," he said.

She was asleep.

His heart began to thud as he thought of Curtis's proposal when he had called at his office. He wondered if he should tell the P.M. about it. But Curtis would soon be leaving. Perhaps the whole thing would blow over. He got out of bed and sat by the window looking down into the deserted street.

On Friday night Sir Christopher Dangerfield was sitting down to dinner at his flat in Porchester Terrace when the telephone rang. It was Jane. She spoke in an excited, trembling voice.

"Is that you, Christopher? Oh, I'm so relieved. Something frightful's happened—something absolutely awful."

"What is it, Jane? Tell me calmly and quietly."

"Michael's at Cwmbräu . . ."

"Well?"

"And you remember that funny little man we met with him at the House?"

"The American—Collindale?"

"Is that his name? Yes, that's the one."

"Well?" He could hear her take breath.

"Well, he's come to dinner. He's arrived. He's in the drawing-room."

"What about it? That's not very terrible."

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"Oh, but it is. I invited him to dinner and forgot all about it. And now he's arrived and Michael's away."

Dangerfield laughed loudly.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Christopher, do please come to dinner. Come straight away."

"I've got Huberton with me. We were just going to deal with caviar and cassis, followed by a cold chicken."

"Bring them, Christopher. We'll need them." Her agitation was over. She was cajoling him.

"I'll try and persuade Huberton," Dangerfield said.

"All right," said Jane decisively. "Tell him I expect you both in ten minutes."

After dinner Jane knitted, while the men smoked cigars and talked. Huberton, tactful and sensitive, had several times thanked her for inviting him to meet Curtis. Dangerfield had explained that Erskine had asked him to deputise as his host.

"It is indeed a privilege for me to be allowed to penetrate into the heart of an English family," said Curtis, and the other three had inclined their heads graciously. "I'm only sorry," added Curtis, "that Michael and Robert aren't here. When you're in New York next year, Mrs. Erskine . . ."

Jane fluttered her hands.

"You will be some time. I hope you and Michael will call us. And that goes for these gentlemen too."

Huberton and Dangerfield bowed.

"I'll ask one of my friends to look you up when she's in Washington," said Jane. "Hilda Fursby, a Civil Servant. She's due to leave next month."

"I am always delighted to meet your Civil Servants," said Curtis.

"She's a most admirable woman," said Dangerfield, "with one failing. When one wants to treat her as a woman she demands to be treated as a man. And when one wants to treat her as a man she insists on being treated as a woman."

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"Yes," said Huberton. "She knows America well. During the war she used to lecture on the British Way of Life."

"I wonder if you know Lady Applebourne?" Curtis asked. "An Englishwoman living in New York. She entertains a lot."

"I knew her husband," said Huberton.

"She's a lovely person," said Curtis musingly. "She was hostess to the British delegation several times. Lovely person—fine advertisement for Britain."

"I've seen her photograph," said Jane. "Didn't she marry some film star?"

"No, that must be someone else," said Curtis. "Lady Applebourne's . . . well, Hollywood's not her class. You ask Michael."

"Oh, was she a friend of Michael's too?"

"Everyone knew Lady Applebourne. She looked after the whole delegation."

"I'll have to ask Michael about her," said Jane with affected menace.

"A lovely person!" murmured Curtis as if in soliloquy, though allowing himself to be overheard. "Everyone loves her."

"There was a charming picture of her in the Press the other day," said Huberton.

"Don't mention the Press in my presence," said Jane, putting down her knitting. "I can't forgive them for publishing the story about Michael and the Treasury."

"It was too bad, Mrs. Erskine," said Curtis. "I heard about it."

"Spencer's a most frightful fellow," said Dangerfield. "Utterly unscrupulous and ruthless. He once said to me, 'Erskine will never be Prime Minister. When he knocks a man down, he'll always help him up.' In politics Spencer's got a simple faith. He says it's no good helping up your rivals, whether they're in your Party or not. The right thing to do, when one of them's on his way down, is to kick him good and hard so that he doesn't come back."

"He was joking, of course," said Curtis, shocked.

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"Not a bit of it. He was pretending to joke, but I swear he meant every word of it. Look how he got on in his paper. They used to have that old chap—what's his name—Gorrington as their Lobby man. Spencer got rid of him by blackguarding the poor old fellow to his Lordship."

"And, of course, by bringing in better stories," said Huberton. "Spencer has a deadly combination of gifts. He's charming, intelligent, good-looking and entirely selfish. His chief weakness is a grudge that he was born in the lower middle-classes, and dare not admit it—even to himself."

"He's caused Michael a great deal of worry," said Jane, following her own course of thought.

"Was the P.M. angry?" Huberton asked.

"That's the awful part of it," said Jane. "Michael never really talks to me about politics. He saw the P.M. and I assume it was all right. But I never really knew how he took it. Poor Michael. He's got such a lot to do. He's giving the Party Television Talk next week."

"I always feel sorry for you politicians on those programmes," said Huberton to Dangerfield. "You all look so anxious to please and yet so tortured."

"I've been televised," said Curtis shyly.

"Really?" said Jane. "Do tell us about it, Mr. Collindale."

"Not by your B.B.C.," said Curtis. "In America. In Washington, at the Senate Committee . . ."

"Ah, yes," said Huberton. "A sort of trial by ordeal."

"Indeed, Lord Huberton," said Curtis, "I felt sorry for some of the witnesses. There they were—lights and bulbs flashing, intense heat, cameras focusing this way and that, and about twenty attendants moving about in all directions. I wasn't surprised that some of the men on the stand were in a state of mental turbulence. Oh, no, I'm against the television of public trials."

"But isn't the whole point of public trials to safeguard the accused?" asked Jane. "That's what I always thought."

"Certainly, ma'am," said Curtis. "The courtroom audience is there on the spot to see the defendant gets a

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fair deal, and no finagling. But the twenty million T.V. audience is looking in for fun."

"A Roman circus," said Dangerfield.

"The head on the pikestaff," said Huberton.

Encouraged by this approval, Curtis went on, "I didn't mind appearing myself. In fact, I enjoyed my double-act with Senator Pye. I said to him, in front of everybody, 'T.V.'s unfair to your witnesses. You want to revive the pillory and decapitation?' And he said to me, roaring, 'It might be a very fine thing to put some of these damn crooked tax collectors in the stocks.' So I said to him, in a level voice, 'Are you in favour, Senator, of public hanging?' and do you know what that Senator said, that Grand Old Man with the white locks?"

"No, what?" said Jane politely.

Curtis in a hushed voice answered, "He said, 'I'm against public hanging. I myself would disembowel them.'"

"Horrid!" said Huberton.

"A technician!" said Dangerfield.

"Well," said Jane brightly. "You certainly have lively arguments in America. I'm not sure I could keep pace if I lived there. How does Lady Appleby manage?"

"Applebourne," said Huberton.

"Oh, fine, fine," Curtis reassured her. "She's a sparkler. She'll race along with any man."

"It all sounds too fast for me. I'm glad for my own sake that Michael can't stand intellectual women."

"She isn't intellectual," said Curtis with a self-sufficient laugh. "She's very English. Pretty and happy."

They chatted for an hour, till Dangerfield said, "Thank you, Jane, for a lovely dinner. I fear it's time for us to go."

He and Huberton both looked at Curtis, who was half lying, at ease, against the cushions of a tapestried armchair. He made no move.

"Perhaps Mr. Collindale and I may be allowed to stay a few moments longer," said Huberton. "I'll give him a lift in my taxi."

Curtis nodded. "I'll be honoured, Lord Huberton."

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When Dangerfield had gone Jane turned to Huberton and said, "Christopher's our very best friend. There's no one I trust more than him." Then as an afterthought she added, "He was terribly upset about my telling Spencer."

"I didn't know . . ." said Huberton.

"Oh, yes," said Jane, walking across the room to straighten a picture. "There's no point now in keeping it a secret. I blurted the whole thing out to Spencer that weekend at your place. I could have killed myself afterwards. Michael was so sweet about it." She turned to Curtis. "Forgive this 'shop.' It must be dreadfully dull for you."

"Not at all," said Curtis. "I am very interested in British politics. From the frontier, as it were. I too have suffered from the Press. Michael has all my sympathy."

"He's been sleeping so badly lately," said Jane. "I get fearfully worried about him."

"I knew a man," said Curtis, "who was so hounded by a radio-commentator he had to be psycho-analysed for a year, it worried him so much."

"I've been psycho-analysed," said Huberton. "It's the most expensive way I know of dictating one's memoirs. Was your friend cured?"

"Yes," said Curtis. "The radio-man shot himself."

"Sympathetic magic!" said Jane.

"No," said Curtis. "I didn't tell you my friend was living with the radio-man's wife."

"Well, there's nothing like that about Michael," said Jane firmly. "But he is sleeping badly. He lives on sleeping-pills nowadays. I'm desperately worried."

Huberton rose, and Curtis rose with him.

"If I were you," said Huberton, as if to himself, "do you know what I'd do?"

His blue eyes were bright with his sudden new idea.

"What?" asked Jane.

"I'd go and see the P.M."

"The P.M.?"

"Of course, the P.M. I'd go and see him—after all, you are Michael's wife. Go and see him and tell him about

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Spencer. If I know Michael, he's taken the responsibility, and the anxiety is gnawing at him. Isn't that so?"

Curtis nodded. "If I know Michael," he said, "that's just what it is."

"See the Prime Minister," Jane repeated.

"Of course," said Huberton. "But, I hope you won't mind me saying this, Jane, I shouldn't say anything about it to Michael. You know, sometimes husbands . . ."

Jane nodded her head. "Yes, you men can be so silly."

"Yes," said Huberton. "You really ought to see the P.M."

"When?"

"Any time. Tonight, tomorrow. Tonight best of all. He never goes to bed before two."

As she handed them their hats, Jane said, "Do you really think it would put things right if I saw the P.M.?"

"I'm certain," said Huberton gravely.

While the two men waited for a taxi in the downstairs hall, they caught each other's eye from time to time, but said nothing. At Claridge's, Curtis shook hands with Huberton, and said, "Good night, sir. I appreciate you. You are a humorist."

"In my youth," said Huberton, "I considered a day ill spent if I hadn't made at least one joke, practical if possible. Lately my average has fallen."

CHAPTER NINE

The Prime Minister

"ONE MOMENT, PLEASE," said the telephonist. "I've a call for you."

In the darkness Jane rumbled the receiver into a more convenient position, and shook her head out of sleep.

"Jane?" It was Erskine speaking from Cwmbrau.

"Michael! What a lovely surprise! Where are you, darling?"

"In the hotel. Did I wake you?"

"Not exactly. It doesn't matter. What time is it, Michael?"

"Nearly one."

"Oh, darling. You ought to be asleep. Don't they ever give you any rest?"

"I must have woken you."

"No, it's wonderful to hear your voice. I wish you were with me. Here beside me."

"So do I."

Their conversation halted.

"What was the meeting like?"

"Pretty rough. The roughest I remember for years. There were a few fights at the back."

"Did they heckle you?"

"Oh, yes, there was some organised heckling. But I dealt with it all right. I think somehow we'll win Cwmbrau."

"I'm so glad. They're terribly unscrupulous. And to think that I used to like John Vaughan. Once upon a time . . ."

"He's nothing. He'd get just as many votes if he were a baboon, as long as he had Morgan's label."

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"Don't think about it, darling. Why aren't you in bed?"

"I am."

"Then why aren't you asleep?"

She heard his short laugh.

"I never can sleep after a meeting. I hear all the voices, and see all the faces pushed into mine. And the argument goes on—endlessly."

"You ought to be tougher, Michael. Why don't you forget it all now, and go to sleep?"

"I will, darling. I only wanted to hear your voice."

Their conversation hesitated again.

"Michael?" Jane said.

"Yes."

"You're not still worrying because I told Spencer?"

A pause.

"No. Not much."

"I'm so wretched about it. I thought you'd forgiven me."

"I have. It's all over. Don't think about it."

"How can I help it?" Her voice trailed away. "Come back soon, Michael."

"The moment I can. Good-night, Jane; and bless you."

"Bless you, darling."

She heard the click of his receiver, and then, wide awake, turned on the light. For a while she lay alert, certain that she would not fall asleep again and thus subdue the project, amorphous but compelling, which Huberton had introduced to her mind. Suddenly it became precise, the natural and obvious course which it would have been laughable not to follow, so that, in a moment of illumination, she felt a guilty self-reproach that she hadn't long before had the courage and enterprise to act.

Next to the telephone which she had just used was another with a red circle round the mouthpiece. It was Erskine's private line to 10 Downing Street, reserved for the most confidential business. She could not remember him using it more than ten times since he had been in the

Cabinet, but, when ever he had done so, the inert instrument, neglected and rimmed with dust, had acquired a magical and instantaneous efficiency.

She stretched her hand towards it, and lowered it again. She knew that she would be able to explain everything to the Prime Minister, and that he would understand. Perhaps tomorrow morning might be better. But tomorrow he might be at Chequers. He usually went there on Saturday. And after that Michael would be back. She couldn't possibly speak to the Prime Minister if Michael were there. He wouldn't approve. He'd hate it. This was something that needed the greatest tact and diplomacy.

Her hand moved before her will. She heard an immediate voice, and simultaneously said, "This is Jane Erskine. It's urgent. I want to speak to the Prime Minister." As she said it, she caught sight of her watch on the table, and thought to herself, "Oh, God, it's five past one."

"Yes!" said a new voice. It was like the snap of a very dry biscuit.

"This is Jane Erskine. I want to speak to the Prime Minister."

"Yes!" Another biscuit snapped.

"I want . . . may I come and see you, please—now?"

"Don't think so. I'm fast asleep." The biscuits were snapping busily.

"Oh, please. It's terribly important. It's about Michael."

"What's it all about? This isn't my usual time for pleasantries."

"I can't really say on the telephone." She wanted the conversation to end. "But if it's inconvenient, I do apologise. Perhaps we might leave it."

She could hear the Prime Minister talking to someone who had entered his room. "I want a report. Yes, now. See if it's in the other papers." When he spoke to her again his voice had changed. It was graver, its irritation, soothed by concern.

"I could see you in a quarter of an hour, Jane, if you can manage it. How's Robert? Did he get in the team?"

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"Oh, yes—yes. Thank you so much. I feel so guilty disturbing you."

The Prime Minister answered slowly, "I am anxious to see you, Jane."

As her taxi turned into Downing Street Jane wanted to rap at the glass panel and order the driver to turn back faster than he had come, for suddenly she felt that she was committing an enormity. The wiper moved across the windscreen with a relentless slap, a dreary accompaniment to her nausea, splashing the empty, rain-swept street into her vision. Michael. She could see his solemn expression. The faint frown that she sometimes saw on his face when she was making a fool of herself and couldn't stop. And now, behind his back, she was calling on the Prime Minister at half-past one in the morning. Automatically she groped in her hand-bag for a cigarette, but already the taxi was making a broad sweep past the Foreign Office, swinging round the cul-de-sac, and drawing up outside Number 10. A policeman in a black cape moved up from the railings, and stood watching her as she paid the driver.

"Got an appointment with the Prime Minister, Miss?" he asked sceptically.

"Yes," said Jane, and rang the bell.

Inside the vestibule a butler took her mackintosh, and asked her to wait. Now she felt calmer. In the past she had frequently visited the Prime Minister with Michael, and the simple Georgian rooms were familiar to her. After about five minutes the butler took her into a drawing-room, where the Prime Minister was waiting to greet her.

He was wearing a camel-hair dressing-gown, and his thin white hair was disarranged, as if he had only lately risen from bed. From his striped pyjamas his neck, normally hidden by his high white collar, stood out thin and bird-like. His eyebrows too were frowsted, scattered and plucked like the plumage of a goose that has been fighting. He looked old and tired and indignant.

"Sit down, Jane," he said, motioning her to a chair with

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the copy of *The Times* that he carried in his hand. His frown faded. "It's nearly thirty years since a beautiful young woman called on me in the middle of the night. Do you know what I'm reading?"

Jane shook her head.

"The obituary notices in yesterday's *Times*," the Prime Minister said. "Reading and writing obituaries is the last diversion of old age. One by one your friends and acquaintances drop away—one by one. Till the crowd thins out. And you wait your turn. Like musical chairs. No use scampering. No use hurrying."

Jane looked at her flowered afternoon frock, and felt unattractive and middle-aged.

"It's so kind of you to see me," she said.

"Your father," said the Prime Minister reflectively, "was one of my best friends. Only a few years older than myself. He taught me Greek at Balliol. Come, my dear."

He took her arm and led her into an adjoining room, where two places were laid at a table. "I always have breakfast when I wake in the middle of the night," he said. "It's my invariable rule. When you were on your way here, Jane, I designed a simple menu—eggs, bacon, sausages and a Château Citran, 1906. Almost too old, and yet very much alive. Grave, generous, wordly, and as to the sausages, a rather condescending wine."

A new surge of sickness rose in Jane's throat.

"Yes," she said. "That will be lovely."

"I've always found," said the Prime Minister, "that eating and mental energy have the closest association. Indeed, the quality of my own speeches has a direct relationship to the amount of sustenance I have before I make them."

Jane pressed her hands together under the table to stop them trembling.

"Yes," she said, "it's very important."

"Food is the most urgent passion of extreme youth and of extreme age. It's the first and last appetite." The bacon and eggs had arrived, and the Prime Minister continued to

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talk as he ate. "Everything—fame, distinction, even wealth—yields to the compulsive demands . . ."

"I came to see you about Michael," Jane interrupted him.

"It won't be long—not long—before I too must go to pasture. . . .

*'Solve senescentes equature sanus equum ne
Peccet ad extremum ridendus et ilia ducat.'* "

"I don't know Latin," said Jane.

"It's a weakness of our age," said the Prime Minister benevolently. "If I had time, I'd make Latin and cookery two compulsory subjects in every girl's school. The only two. I'll translate, Jane. Those words mean, 'Put the old horse out to grass. Don't wait till it's a laughing-stock with the staggers.' "

He drank a glass of wine, and added, "It's true of Prime Ministers as well as of horses. But that's yet to come. Now tell me. Why have you come to see me at this remarkable hour?"

"Oh, dear," said Jane helplessly. "It's hard to explain. I'll try. But before I begin, I want you to promise—I'm putting this so badly—will you please promise not to tell Michael I've been to see you?"

"I will not tell Michael."

The butler came in with a swathe of newspapers, and handed them to the Prime Minister, who said, "Go on talking, Jane. These are the early morning and provincial editions. I'm going to look at the headlines while you speak to me. It's a form of mental ambidexterity that I've acquired with the years. On the other hand, I also have the art, let me tell you, of concentrating on a speaker with a completely closed mind. Go on talking."

"I haven't much to tell you. Michael's been sleeping so badly lately. He's been worried and unhappy ever since the story about his appointment leaked out."

"It's quite remarkable," said the Prime Minister, turning over a new page, "how a good wine, well corked and stored,

can keep its virtue far beyond its predicted span. Pray have another glass, my dear. I accept, in a sense, that the sausage is an insult to the Citran. But in another sense, it's a foil. Its very humility enhances the noble qualities of the wine. It brings out the essential *abofness* of the Citran."

Jane drank hastily from the glass in front of her. The Prime Minister looked up to study her expression.

"A certain flintiness?" he asked.

"Oh, no, not at all. It's delicious, quite delicious."

He shook his head, and sipped from his own glass. "Yes, yes," he said quickly. "Try it again. The flintiness is an integral part of this wine. It's what the French call '*bien corsé*.'"

He had put the papers down, and had taken hold of the stem of his glass, while he champed calmly and deliberately at a grimly piece of sausage, wrinkling his nose with the movement. Jane looked at him with an upsurge of anger, that joined with her fury at Huberton for having persuaded her into this situation. She suspected that the Prime Minister had sentenced her to this anguish of uncertainty and indignity as a punishment for having disturbed him.

When he had drained his glass he held it to the light examining the dregs inside it. Jane sat upright in her chair, while the Prime Minister, with his dewlaps pendent over his dressing-gown, was composing his next sentence in a remote self-absorption. She knew these recuperative pauses well, and their purpose in his conduct of negotiations. Prolonged beyond the limit of comfort and courtesy, they were designed through the embarrassment of silence to provoke the visitor to some indiscreet or banal remark. In which case the Prime Minister, affecting not to have heard, would then make his visitor repeat his statement in still greater discomfort. Having thus established his moral and intellectual dominance, the Prime Minister would close in with rapid, jabbing questions, leaving no reply to his victim except gasping 'buts'. If, on the other hand, the visitor tried to interrupt the pause, and guide the conversation with a few social or political phrases before his uneasiness had matured to his

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tormentor's taste, the Prime Minister would immediately resume his own theme, so that the interrupter would find himself boorishly engaged in a dissonant duet.

Jane waited rigidly, determined to outlast him.

"Jane," he said, his gaze on the table.

She looked up.

"When Elizabeth was alive, she was very fond of you."

Jane remembered how, before she had married Michael, when he was still reading for the Bar, Elizabeth Bannister used to invite them both to her tea-parties at Downing Street. When the Prime Minister drifted into his silences she was always able to preserve the conversation with her gentle enquiries and encouragement, probing the private affairs of her visitors with a tender and inoffensive curiosity. Among her favourites, Michael had been specially favoured. It was she who had persuaded him to enter Parliament, and Jane could never look back on the years of her husband's promotion without thinking of Elizabeth, her notes of congratulation, her commendation of him to her guests—"this soaring young man," a description that had confused and delighted him.

One night at a dinner-party, Elizabeth had suddenly risen from the table. Her guests rose too, but she waved them down. "I'll be back in a moment," she said, and left the room. Within half an hour she was dead. She had died courteously. And with her death the years of banter at No. 10 and the tea-parties for the young men were ended. The clocks chimed bleakly in the empty rooms of the flat at the top of the building that once had been full of gaiety.

"We both loved her dearly," Jane said.

"She was loved by very many people," said the Prime Minister. "She was so good that we took her for granted. We thought she'd always be there, because we could never imagine the world would be the world without her." He trundled a salt-cellar across the table, where it came to rest against a vase. "It isn't the same. There are times, Jane, when I need advice. Not the advice of professionals. I don't

want any more experts. I've got too many. I miss Elizabeth's common sense. She'd know how to deal with this."

"I've given you a lot of trouble," said Jane. "It was I who told Spencer."

She said it defiantly, her face raised to his, her fingers clutching the material of her dress under her handbag.

"I was you?" said the Prime Minister, unmoving. "I thought as much. Never for a moment thought Michael would be such a fool. But why didn't he tell me?" He threw his napkin on the table. "Why on earth didn't he tell me? I asked him specifically if he knew how it had leaked. He . . . he prevaricated. That wasn't fitting. No, indeed it wasn't." He walked over to the oil painting on the wall and back again. "Michael didn't show trust in me, as I've shown it in him. That was unreliable of him—unworthy."

"It was my fault," said Jane. "All my fault. Michael didn't want you to know what a . . . what a ninny of a wife he has."

She bent forward and burst into tears, tears that she had stifled and repressed ever since her first outburst at Huberton. They welled through her fingers, and dribbled over her hands as she tried to hold them back, but even as she did so her whole body shook with misery at the thought of the irrevocable harm which she had caused.

The Prime Minister lifted her chin and looked at her face, smeared with tears and blotches.

"It's not your fault nor Michael's," he said, his face transformed by a bantering smile. "It's mine. In the normal way I ask new Ministers, before their appointments are announced, to tell no one, not even their wives. What happens then is that they tell their wives what I told them, and their wives are so afraid of their guilty secret that they fall into an unusual mutism. In Michael's case . . ."

Jane stopped sobbing, and wiped her face with the table napkin that the Prime Minister handed her.

Then she slowly smiled and said, "You're being very chivalrous. I've no excuse for my brick except idiotic vanity. But thank you." She took hold of her empty glass and

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swivelled it nervously on the table. "Now that I'm here, there is one other thing I wanted to ask you."

The Prime Minister waited.

"Do you think," she went on, "that the announcement of Michael's appointment to the Treasury might be made before the end of next week? It sounds rather ridiculous, I know, but it's his birthday next Friday."

The Prime Minister closed his eyes for a few moments, while Jane waited for his reply. At last he looked at her from under his eyebrows and said, "How old are you?"

"I'm nearly forty."

"It's an age that often goes with indiscretion. I must tell you, Jane, quite shortly, that when I make changes in my Cabinets I sometimes consult my colleagues—never their wives."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Jane. "I fear I've put my foot in it again. Perhaps I'd better go."

She picked up her handbag hurriedly, and rose to leave.

"Before you go," said the Prime Minister, who had risen to his feet as well, "there's one small matter that you may be able to help me with. You weren't with Michael in America by any chance?"

"No," said Jane. "He never takes me on his interesting trips."

"I see," said the Prime Minister, unsmiling.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She laughed for self-assurance. "You're looking at me just like a doctor looking at a patient."

The Prime Minister took her hand in his, and patted it twice with his own soft, freckled hand.

"My dear, I might as well tell you that a very ugly campaign is brewing up against Michael, and, by inference, against us. While you were sitting there, and I've been talking to you about vintages, I've been trying to solve a problem."

"I don't understand," said Jane. She sat on a nearby chair.

"Neither do I," said the Prime Minister. "But I propose

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to understand as soon as possible." His voice was harsh and clipped, and his whole demeanour had changed, his lethargy now translated into a brisk alertness, his languor into energy. "I have to know—and very soon—what truth there is in the suggestion that Michael borrowed money from an American, a professional lobbyist, when he was in New York."

"But it's absurd," said Jane, her voice rising. "Michael's always been the most scrupulous man in the world about his foreign travel allowances. He'd never do the slightest, tiniest thing wrong. What possible grounds can anyone have for saying that he would borrow money abroad? And from someone like that. It's malicious gossip. I'm sure it's that. It's gossip and jealousy. Oh, please don't believe it—not for a second."

The Prime Minister put his hands in the deep pockets of his dressing-gown.

"We'll see how it goes," he said in a quieter voice. "In the meantime, every paper this morning carries an innuendo, taken up from a circumstantial report by Spencer, that Michael not only borrowed this money but . . ."

"But what?"

"But was influenced by it in shaping the American Agreement and Heaven knows what."

"It's grotesque. It's utterly fantastic. You know Michael. How could anyone possibly imagine that he'd do such a thing?"

"There are also two questions down for next week. Carrington's asking me on Tuesday what are the rules concerning the acceptance of gifts by Ministers from foreign nationals, and the Home Secretary has a question, I think it's Carrington's, asking about permission to stay in this country for an American known as Collindale, who is, in fact, Curtis, the lobbyist I told you about."

"Collindale? Curtis?"

"He's the fellow who's supposed to have lent the money to Michael. Is there anything wrong, Jane?"

"Oh, no."

She lowered her head so that the blood might flow back.

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The Prime Minister pressed a bell, and asked the butler to send for a car. He pressed a second bell, and said to a secretary who appeared, "Assemble them, Andrew. Find out who's available."

The secretary, who understood the formula, said, "Yes, sir," and withdrew.

"Are you feeling better, Jane? I can send Testy with you."

"No, it's nothing." She looked at him with a bewildered air. "What happens next?" she asked. "What does Michael have to do?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We have to watch what happens, see how the questions go in the House, see how the Press handles it, see how the country takes it. Actually, I think Morgan's behind it all. In fact I'm sure of it. It's the very situation that a man with his twisted mind would contrive. Anything for a petty Party victory. Anything to win a bye-election, even if it means ruining a man's career and harming the national interest. Between ourselves, he's perfectly mad."

He walked with Jane to the door, where the butler met her with her mackintosh.

The Prime Minister tapped her on the cheek and said, "Don't worry, Jane. Don't worry. You can't be a sailor and never face a storm. I'll talk to Michael. Everything will be all right."

"Thank you," said Jane, and hurried to the car.

At home, she lay fully clothed on her bed in the darkness, weeping as she thought of the humiliating failure of her visit to the Prime Minister, and of his alternating pity and annoyance. She'd done it for Michael. She would do anything for Michael. Anything. Anything at all. It had always been like that. He had always been more important to her—Jane thought of alternative importances—even more important than Robert or Sarah. She'd call on the Prime Minister every night for a year if it would help Michael. But when she thought of Curtis her gorge was filled with a sickening reflux of stale wine.

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"It's impossible—impossible," she kept saying to herself. "Oh, Michael, Michael."

She wondered what she would order for his lunch tomorrow, "and with dwindling sobs, exhausted, fell asleep.

The Rt. Hon. Arthur Benson-Craig, the Lord Privy Seal, who had already removed his white tie and collar when the Prime Minister's secretary telephoned, and had been obliged to replace them, was indignant and weary. With his carefully spread coat-tails, he wasn't quite sure whether he wasn't perhaps overdressed. The other six Cabinet Ministers who had answered the summons were equally uncomfortable. They had become accustomed to late night conferences in the middle of the week, which the Prime Minister's increasing insomnia had seemed to encourage. But Friday night—that was an invasion, of privacy, an end to domestic life.

Hakluyt, the Minister for Colonial Co-ordination, was still breathing deeply, not with the effort of his displacement from Bratt's, but with the recollection, as the Prime Minister spoke, of the incredible hand he had to abandon when the message came. Lord Telfer, the Minister of Interdepartmental Co-ordination, had a special complaint. He had only lately returned from his honeymoon after his second marriage, and, uxorious, had gone to bed early.

"That is why," the Prime Minister said, "I think we'd better recognise that this Erskine business isn't necessarily a small crisis. It may be a big crisis. When I spoke to him at Cwmbrau a few minutes ago I rather felt he was treating the matter lightly. Let us hope it deserves so to be treated. I felt obliged to ask you here to give you this information, so that if you are tackled about it over the week-end, you will understand that our policy, for the time being at any rate, is to let the attack develop. Let it run! Let us see the line they're going to take! Let's see what Erskine has to say in detail! And then we'll know the answer."

He poured himself a whisky from the decanter in front of him, and then passed it to Benson-Craig.

"Are there any observations?" he asked.

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"This may mean an interdepartmental enquiry," said Lord Telfer glumly. He could see his work increasing.

"More likely a Select Committee," said the Chief Whip. "Morgan won't take less."

"For the moment," said the Prime Minister, "it means nothing. It's a crisis of credit. But it looks both ways, at us and at the others. We'll see if we can't blow the whole thing out."

"High explosives, sir?" asked Benson-Craig.

"No, my dear fellow, with a good gust of House of Commons laughter."

The Prime Minister turned to the Chief Whip, who with his large, pale face had sunk into a well-practised appearance of monolithic apathy.

"In the meantime," he said, "we will face an otherwise uninteresting week with resolution and confidence. What's the business, Chief?"

Like a somnambulist responding to directions, the Chief Whip gave the list of subjects before the House, and ended, "That leaves two Opposition Prayers on Tuesday, Agriculture (Pig Grants) Bill, Report and Third Reading on Wednesday. Thursday, Opposition Supply Day. Cost of living."

"See that we have a full turn-out for that."

"Yes, sir. It's a three-liner."

"What's the invalid position?"

"Pretty bad. Ainsworth had a motor-smash yesterday with Phillips and James."

"That's serious. If this goes on, we'll have to have a rule against more than two Members driving in one car. Another few crashes, and we'll lose our majority. It really would be ignominious to be defeated by careless driving. I'd be obliged if you would all take special precautions on your way home."

They rose, and began to move towards the door.

"I hope," said the Prime Minister, as he bade them good-night, "I hope I didn't disturb you, or draw you from important affairs."

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"Oh, no," they all answered.

"Indeed, no," Benson-Craig added.

"Not a bit, sir," said Telfer enthusiastically. "The night air is most deliciously fresh and stimulating."

"Personally," said the Prime Minister, "I find the night air disagrees with me. But all these things are a matter of taste."

When they had gone he returned to his arm-chair, and began to read the Epistle he was translating.

*"Omnem credę diem tibi diluxisse supremum.
Grata superveniet quae non sperabitur hora . . .*

*Believe each day h's dawned your last,
Each hour, unhopcd for, will grateful come . . ."*

He rumbled the translation, and prepared himself for a thoughtful night.

CHAPTER TEN

The Garden Party

JANE SAT IN an arm-chair watching her husband dress. He tightened his tie, buttoned his double-breasted, pearl-grey waistcoat, and brushed his hair in front of the ormolu looking-glass.

"My coat," he said.

She handed him his morning-coat, and he fitted himself into it, easily and comfortably.

"My carnation."

She took a flower from the glass on her dressing-table, and put it in his button-hole.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "My female valet."

He turned towards the glass, put his arms around her from behind, and kissed her up and down her cheek and behind her ear.

"You'll spoil your flower," she said.

"I don't mind," said Erskine. Pressed against him his wife's body had a congruent familiarity, and he raised his right hand and laid it on her face and neck. "I like looking at you in the glass."

She answered, "I'm not looking. I just like feeling you near me."

He said, "I like looking into this glass. It's like the frame of a picture."

Jane half opened her eyes, and looked at the reflection of her bare shoulders against her husband's formal clothes, and the silk quilted bed with her dressing-gown drooping casually at its foot.

"It looks a little improper, darling," she said.

"Let's not go to the garden-party," said Erskine. "Let's stay."

"Stay here? The whole afternoon?"

"Yes." He turned her face, and kissed her beneath her chin.

She twisted herself round abruptly. "No, Michael. We must go. They'll say you're running away. You saw what the papers said this morning."

She took up a saffron-coloured dress with a square neck that was lying spread over the pillows, and drew it over her head.

"Do me up, darling," she said. Erskine buttoned the three buttons at the back and said, "I'll wait for you in the sitting-room."

The morning newspapers lay scattered by the bookshelves, and he fingered them distastefully, yet drawn irresistibly to read them, like a man with an obsessional compulsion to gaze at his nails, who recognises the uselessness of his activity but is fatally condemned to engage in it. The political commentators in the Sunday papers had made, as if from a single inspiration, the conjecture that the Prime Minister had refused a proposal for a Select Committee, but would reply definitely to the rumours in connection with the Anglo-American Agreement during Question Time on Tuesday. Spencer in his newspaper had repeated, without comment, what seemed to be a "hand-out" from the Prime Minister's office, though at its side was a photograph of Curtis, taken at London Airport, with the caption, "News Boss Leaves London." Two of the morning papers had the headline, "Erskine Absent," and the lead-line that followed was identical. "The Rt. Hon. Michael Erskine, M.P., was not present at a late consultation on Friday night at No. 10 Downing Street, which was attended by leading members of the Cabinet including the Attorney General."

"Are you still reading that nonsense?" Jane said, entering the room as he guiltily threw down the paper. "You know, if you read the papers less and looked at the baby more,

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you'd be a much more restful person. Now, confess. When did you last see her?"

"Good Lord," said Erskine. "Not since the week-end."

The baby was for him a remote, impersonal entity that he sometimes greeted for a few minutes of mutual indifference before he left the flat in the morning, and that sometimes prevented his wife from accompanying him on his engagements.

"I'm sorry, Jane. You know I didn't think Robert was a human being till he was five or six."

"She was so sweet," said Jane.

"Yes?"

"Absolutely drunk with milk."

Uninterested, Erskine put his hands on Jane's shoulders and said, "You look beautiful, darling. And what a wonderful big hat! What shall I do when they want to play hoop-la with you?"

"I hope you'll fight for me to the last throw. Come on, Michael!"

He took his umbrella and top-hat, and together they walked happily, arm-in-arm, to the Ministry car that was waiting for them at the door.

"One moment, Mr. Erskine," a photographer called. Erskine paused and smiled. "Now with Mrs. Erskine." She held her hat to stop it from blowing away, and they both smiled to the photographers, multiplied to four, who surrounded them.

Near the trees on the east side of the Palace lawns a regimental band was playing excerpts from *The Barber of Seville*. The music blew, well disciplined, from the brass, *piano* to *fortissimo*, but mostly *piano*, to match the discretion of the sauntering groups and restrained conversation. Although it was only a quarter to four, the guests had already begun to move towards the tea-marquee on the west side of the grounds, and were filling the tables outside. During the day the sun had shone steadily and the heat, now at its

greatest, had turned the sky from its morning blue into a colourless haze. The men in their formal clothes were sweating, their faces red against their collars, their hats forming a damp rim against their brows. Some of the older women too, after walking up and down the hard, brown-green lawns, were already tired. But the bright dresses and the many-coloured glitter of straw hats gave the visitors collectively an air of unrelenting gaiety.

From the steps of the Palace, Erskine and Jane looked at the pattern of movement, from the North Gate to the band, from the band to the marquee and, from time to time, a sortie to the double-hedged lane of guests where the Royal party was moving. Dangerfield came up to the gravel at the foot of the steps, and took off his hat to Jane.

"There's nothing I like more on a day like this than to meet my friends," he said. "It gives me the chance to remain uncovered for about ten seconds, and feel a delicious draught."

"What a heavenly day!" said Jane.

"Yes, but most unseasonable," said Dangerfield, patting his neck. "Let's walk towards the tent—very slowly."

"Oh, no, not yet," said Jane. "Let's first stroll about and see whom we know. . . . There's Madeleine!"

They moved across the lawn towards Lady Pembury, who was talking to a Burmese diplomat and the Indian delegate to the International Jute Conference that was being held in London. She smiled a farewell to them, and said, "Darling, how lovely to see you! I've been having the most wonderful talk with U Naw—he's the smaller one. I think they look so wonderful in their native costumes. They make the lawns look somehow so—so imperial. Makes me think of Queen Victoria and *durbars*."

"As long as they don't hear you thinking, Madeleine," said Dangerfield, "it's all right."

"Are you alone, Madeleine?" Jane asked.

"Oh, no. Huberton's about somewhere. For a tall man, he loses himself easily. Here he comes!"

Huberton was approaching from behind the trees, talking

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forcefully to a pale youth in a badly fitting morning-coat who was nodding his head.

"Good Lord," said Erskine. "What's that he's got, in tow?"

"I don't quite know," said Madeleine. "It's a new idea of his. He calls him his Boswell."

"Come on, darling," said Jane, pulling at Erskine's arm. "I think we will have tea after all."

When Huberton arrived he said to Madeleine, "Don't say I abandoned you—no, don't say it. Conrad and I merely went over to the band to find out what they were playing, and to admire you in a proper perspective. You look exquisite. A shepherdess. Not Sèvres. Not Dresden. Pure Fabergé."

"I thought that he was a jeweller."

Huberton looked annoyed. "A sculptor too, I assure you. Have you never heard of the 'Potselui' in the Hermitage?"

Dangerfield, who had gone off with Erskine, returned.

"I refuse to fight for tea," he said. "Even in the Palace. It's the most remarkable spectacle." He waved vaguely to the buffet. "Rich men, provincial Mayors, landed gentry, high civil servants, well-bred women—they are jostling each other for tea as if they'd never eaten before."

"Actually jostling?" Huberton asked with interest.

"Well," said Dangerfield, "the shin-hack, the ankle-kick and the rib-dig are much in use. Let's stay here till the rush is over."

A new and steadily enlarging group had formed itself about twenty yards away.

"Who's that?" said Huberton peering. "Go and find out, Conrad. I thought the Royal party was over there."

Conrad returned and said, "It's Morgan, George Morgan and his entourage."

Madeleine said, "I must go and talk to him."

"If Madeleine had lived before 1914," said Dangerfield when she had gone, "she'd have been the biggest lion-collector in town."

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"Yes," said Huberton. "She's 'a pet. It's her ambition to make the lion lie down with the lamb. Conrad, take that down!"

Morgan, hatless, and wearing a navy-blue suit, walked at ease through the crowd that hemmed him in, opened to let him pass and then reformed around him. A morning-coated visitor who hurried over to see him paused, peered and withdrew, mumbling to his companion, "It's affectation—sheer affectation. You know what politicians are like. They'd stand on their heads in the ball-room at Claridge's if it got them publicity."

Morgan stopped to take a cigarette, and half a dozen hands stretched out to light it for him. "I'm not exactly musical," he said to Smedley, whose morning-coat, hired from Barnet Bros., was causing him some discomfort. "We sometimes think we're musical in Wales just because we like the sound of our own voices. Which are, of course, incomparable," he added quickly. "But I do know the difference between a Haydn quartet and a glee choir."

"Well," said Smedley, "your discrimination is clearly of a highly sensitive kind. What are they playing now?"

"They're playing," Morgan said, "'I Dreamt that I Dwelt in Marble Halls'—probably to cool the guests. I know that because it was the set piece for the Eisteddfod Brass Band competition the year I was trying to get into Ruskin College. We used to live next to the Working Men's Club, where they had the rehearsals. My cousins used to play in the band." He threw his cigarette on the ground. "Every time I sat down to read Jenkins on Equality, damned if the band didn't start again!"

"Well, what effect does it have on you today?"

Morgan looked around at the staring, inquiring faces, most of them examining him with a disdainful hostile curiosity.

"By a reflex action," he said, "it makes me want to sit down and read Jenkins on Equality. Hello, Lady Pembury!"

"Hello, Mr. Morgan," said Madeleine. They shook

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hands with each other. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Will you, one day, satisfy one of my ambitions?"

Morgan said, "I doubt it. I absolutely refuse to join your Party. It's ruining the country."

"Silly!" said Madeleine, tapping him on the wrist with her gloved hand. "Must you always be so political? I want you one day to write an article for me called 'Why I despise fashion.'"

"Oh, but I don't. You misunderstand me. I'm a leader of fashion, in advance of the season. Look here, girl." He took her arm, enclosing it with his firm, large hand, and walked with her towards the marquee. "Fifty years ago—seventy years ago—a morning-coat was normal dress. Today it's a theatrical uniform to be taken out of moth-balls or from the racks of a professional outfitter for weddings, garden parties and funerals. Look at, poor old Smedley—constricted."

"Fatter than ever," said Smedley.

"Sawn . . ."

"Suffocated . . ."

"And not knowing whether the man whose suit he's wearing is dead or bankrupt. Now look at me—cool, relaxed, wearing my own suit, the normal wear of the overwhelming majority of our hard-working fellow citizens." He released Madeleine's arm and smiled, his blue eyes ironic. "A bachelor mustn't have a large wardrobe. It must be neat and functional, elegant in its simplicity, an area of textile no greater than can be covered by a busy man with a clothes brush in ten minutes while he composes a speech."

"Yes," said Madeleine meekly. "I suppose as a republican . . ."

"Me a republican? I haven't been a republican since I was twelve. Republicanism nowadays is an infantile regression—a flight to the tyranny—or the anarchy—of the political nursery."

"I'm sorry if I misunderstood you. But really, Mr Morgan, you won't deny that you're always running down the Lords."

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Morgan looked at her in surprise.

"Where are you living, girl? I injected new life into the Lords. People were saying that it had become a museum. I wanted to make sure that if it was a museum, it would at least be a museum of modern art. In the short time I was Prime Minister I gave peerages to twenty-three Trade Union officials. Miniver and ermine was the uniform of their retirement. And yet you say I'm against the Lords. Shame on you!"

With a reproachful shake of his head, he smiled again and gave her a gentle push in the direction of Huberton, as he resumed his conversation with Smedley.

"There's something about all this," said Smedley, surveying the garden, "that reminds me of a society in decline—like a page of Gibbon."

"There's nothing of Gibbon in this except its style. This"—Morgan waved his arm towards the lawns—"is a typical bit of British understatement. Well behaved, restrained, drooling on for centuries. Ample but not luxurious, ceremonial but without the apparatus that excites envy and attracts disaster. It isn't the Roman Empire. It's Gibbon himself. Understatement, the curse of English style from Gibbon to this day."

"But Gibbon didn't create the English character. . . ."

"No, but he helped to ruin it with his spurious imitations of Roman style—the balanced period and the ramrod mind. From Gibbon to Matthew Arnold? Mediocre emotions for mediocre souls! Meiosis with a snigger!" Morgan began to quote. "'Zenobia never admitted her husband's embraces but for the sake of posterity. If her hopes were baffled, in the ensuing months she reiterated her experiment.'" He laughed, and, like a conductor, motioned up the laughter of those round him. "I used to know Gibbon backwards. I tried to quieten my natural ebullience with the bromides of *Decline and Fall*. Happily . . . I didn't succeed."

When Madeleine rejoined Huberton and Dangerfield she said, "Don't underestimate Morgan. He's a wonderful man. He can beat your intellectuals at their own game."

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"I'm not so sure," said Dangerfield. "It's a foreign language to him—even though he speaks it fluently. He's an intellectual failed. He can never forget—not for one single moment—his lack of formal education—or admit that there's any worthwhile knowledge that he hasn't himself discovered."

"But that's his strength," said Huberton. "He's a genuine, dogmatic intellectual. Other intellectuals waffle and see both sides of the case. Not Morgan. He knows the truth. He found it out for himself in his hotch-potch of books and experience. He's acquired his knowledge with the tips of his fingers."

"I'm—sad about Pedland," Dangerfield said, unwilling to pursue the discussion about Morgan, towards whom he felt a sharp political enmity which translated itself into a physical aversion."

"Why, what happened?" asked Madeleine.

"Oh, the usual thing!" Dangerfield and Huberton bowed their heads regretfully.

"Tried to pick up a plain-clothes policeman at Earl's Court," said Dangerfield.

"Got picked up himself instead," said Huberton.

"Very tactless!" said Madeleine.

"Makes things difficult!" said Dangerfield.

"Persistent too!" said Conrad, entering the conversation. Dangerfield frowned, and Conrad blushed.

"We really haven't seen many people we know," Jane said as she sat with Erskine at tea.

"No," said Erskine, looking at those still waiting three-deep to be served at the buffet. "We haven't actually met many faces we know. But we've seen rather more familiar backs than usual. I've noticed quite a few of our friends dissolving as we come near."

"Oh, nonsense, darling," said Jane. "You're far too sensitive. We've already spoken to Andrew, Madeleine, that nice American—Hargreaves—all sorts of people. Gascoigne. . . ."

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"I never really thought I'd be reassured by my Under-Secretary condescending to talk to me."

Erskine prodded the grass with his umbrella.

"Did you notice how uneasy he was?"

"Oh, Michael, don't! You're really imagining these things. He was perfectly amiable."

"Amiable—yes. But gauche and fumbling. When he spoke about the Agreement he could scarcely look me in the face."

"Well, it's been difficult for him too. He was awkward, I suppose. But . . ."

"I know," said Erskine. "It's like talking to someone with a deformity that stares you in the face—you mustn't mention it. Let's go home, Jane."

"Please, Michael. You really are losing all sense of proportion. Now come on, darling," she added cajolingly. "Do smile. The Grevilles are bearing down on us. You must give them a really vote-catching smile."

She rested her arm on the chair, waiting for the Grevilles to arrive within smiling distance, and Erskine, crossing his legs and holding his umbrella at arm's length, composed himself to give them a temperate but sufficient greeting. Greville, an industrialist, a former Chairman of the B.M.F., who was also well known as a yachtsman, walked with a contented, unhurried aloofness, while his wife, elaborately dressed in billowing white, hurried fussily at his side.

"Now for it," said Jane, and simultaneously she and her husband smiled to the Grevilles, Erskine rising to his feet as he did so. Greville looked straight at Erskine, and, hurrying his wife forward, walked past without smile or greeting. Erskine picked up his hat from the chair, and said quietly, "Come on, Jane. I think it's time we went."

As they walked away, they could hear Mrs. Greville's voice, petulant and incomprehending, from the fringe of the marquee, "But you dragged me past them. It was so rude."

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And Greville's reply, flat and definitive, "We'll talk about that in the car going home."

The Prime Minister and several Cabinet Ministers and their wives were standing near the Palace steps, viewed at a respectful distance by groups of curious observers. A light breeze had sprung up unexpectedly, ruffling the women's frocks and carrying an antiphon of conversation—"It's lovely now."—"If only it had been like this earlier"—wherever it stirred. Gravely, the Prime Minister raised his hat to the rare passers-by whom he recognised, his last strand of white hair falling in a thin lock over his forehead each time he did so.

When Erskine was about eighty yards from the group he said, "Jane, let's stop here a moment. I can't walk past the P.M."

"Michael," she said, taking his arm and looking at him horrified. "We must. We can't stay here in the middle of the lawn."

"I can't. Don't force me, Jane. When I was at school, I had to walk along a narrow plank—it was only six inches from the ground. And I got stuck in the middle. It's just like that now. Don't make me!"

"My dear!" she said, and slid her hand down to his moist palm.

"And at Tsirnikos, when I had to climb on the submarine. Jane, darling. I'm so sorry. I'm not going to make a fool of myself. Let's stay here a moment."

"Yes, darling. I'm here. It'll be all right. You've been doing too much. Much too much."

She stood next to him, looking at his white face, reassuring him with the pressure of her hand.

"It's all right, Michael."

"Yes, darling. In a minute."

The drift was now towards the steps, a current of laughing, happy and tired groups of people, the first hundreds to leave of the thousands who had mottled the lawns. At times they surged around Erskine and Jane, only

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to disperse and leave empty the gap between them and the Prime Minister's party.

The Prime Minister suddenly moved forward, leaving his attendants to interrupt their conversation and follow him hastily, as he walked in Erskine's direction with an arthritic, reflective gait. When he was about thirty yards away he stopped, while his colleagues gathered round him again, and raised his hat to Jane. Automatically, Erskine in turn raised his hat to the Prime Minister. Then together, Jane with her arm linked in her husband's, they walked towards him.

"It's a very long time since we met, Jane," said the Prime Minister. "Michael, it's very anti-social of you to conceal your wife. We would like to see her more often."

"Hear, hear," said the Home Secretary and the Chief Whip together.

"You're looking tired, Michael," said the Prime Minister. "You must have an early night. Tranquillity is most important. We all belong to a restless, sleepless age."

"It's perfectly true," said the Chief Whip, who had a reputation of being able to sleep anywhere at any time.

A new crowd had gathered to watch and listen to the Prime Minister's conversation with Erskine.

"I'm hoping, Michael," said the Prime Minister, raising his voice and looking round, "that as soon as you're not so occupied, you and Jane will come and spend a week-end with me at Chequers. Perhaps in September."

"You're very kind," said Jane.

"Thank you, sir," said Erskine. "We'd love to."

"The beech trees . . ." said the Prime Minister, and his mind wandered off in a dream. Then, "One other thing, Michael. I'd like to see you in my room at four tomorrow."

"Yes, of course," said Erskine.

The Prime Minister and his colleagues raised their hats in a graceful, simultaneous motion, and Erskine raised his in reply. The crowd parted in two places as Erskine and Jane and the Prime Minister and his companions left in different directions.

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Back at the flat Erskine sat on the edge of the bed talking to Jane, who lay on her elbow looking at their photograph in the late edition of the evening paper.

"Good old Erskine Manner," she said. "You look as though you'd had a good day at the races. I don't know how these papers get their photographs out so quickly. It's extraordinary." She picked up another paper. "I like this one," she said. "But don't you think my hat looks too fussy?"

"No, darling," said Erskine, holding her hand.

"They've all got our picture."

"Yes. We're very much in the news. You'll find they've put our photographs next to tomorrow's questions to the P.M."

Jane pushed the papers on to the floor.

"It's only coincidence. I thought the P.M. was absolutely sweet to you today. He went out of his way to show everyone what he thinks of you."

"He was very kind," said Erskine gravely. "He can be the most infuriating——"

"Only when he wants to be, and only for some special reason," Jane said quickly.

"But he can also be very sympathetic and generous. He's got a sort of patient wisdom that never gets troubled. He always sees himself and the country in terms of history. He sometimes maddens me—but I think he's a very great man."

They were silent till Jane said, "I'm so terribly tired after all that sun and walking. Do we have to go out tonight?"

"I've got to be at the House for a division—there's one at ten."

"Well, stay home and let's have dinner together. Michael," she propped herself up on her pillow, "I hope those frightful people, those Grevilles, didn't upset you."

"Good Heavens, no. I think the man's a fraud anyhow. The Treasury's been after him for a long time. When I'm Chancellor I'm going to deal with all those fellows."

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Jane put her arms round his neck, and drew his face down to hers.

"I like to hear you say that," she said.

"Jane," he said, talking into the pillow.

"Yes, darling?"

"I was saying, when I was interrupted by a garden party . . ."

She kissed his cheek. "Yes, darling?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Fun Fair

HELEN LOOKED UP at the Big Dipper, spiralling into the dusk and descending in alpine rushes through an avenue of fairy-lights that traced its route.

"Come on, Tony," she said. "Let's go on it. It terrifies me."

She stared at the disappearing parabola of the mountainous structure, and her hand tightened in his.

"Your hand's sweating," he said.

"I know. It's because I'm so frightened."

She was hatless, her eyes were shining, and on her upper lip was a trace of moisture.

"It reminds me," she said, "of a story I once read—I forget who wrote it—about a girl who was very much in love with a man in some snowy country."

"That's a perfect beginning for a summer night's story."

"Don't interrupt. She loved him, but he didn't return her love. Well, one day he took her to a park where there was a huge, artificial mountain of ice for sledging. She absolutely hated it, but to please him she agreed to go on it. They went to the top, and as they were coming down in the sledge, faster and faster, with the wind howling louder and louder, and the girl almost mad with terror, he murmured, 'I love you.' But when they got to the bottom she wasn't sure if she'd heard him properly."

"That was very wasteful," said Spencer. "How did she deal with the situation?"

"She had to go up again, half dead with fright."

"And then?"

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"It happened all over again."

"I know. The wind howled and howled . . ."

"And he said quietly, 'I love you.' But she wasn't sure."

"What happened in the end?"

"This happened about four times, and when they'd finished sledging he looked absolutely blank, and never said another word about it."

"What happened to her?"

"She died an old maid."

"That's a very sad story," said Spencer, drawing himself up and putting his hands on his diaphragm. He had spent the early part of the afternoon in the House, listening to the Prime Minister's announcement of the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into Erskine's conduct, and gathering comment in the Lobby. Now he felt a combination of relief and success. As long as the allegations against Erskine had been associated with the crankiness of Carrington, who had first mentioned them in the House, Spencer himself had felt tainted by an unwelcome alliance with a Parliamentary eccentric. After this afternoon the allegations had become charges deserving the attention of a Select Committee, and Spencer had been the catalyst, changing, by his intervention, a rumour into a solemn indictment.

"It's a very sad story," he repeated. "It shows that one should be explicit."

They moved towards the turnstile, where a group of paper-hatted girls and boys in gaily-coloured shirts hanging outside their trousers were awaiting their turn for seats in the Big Dipper's carriages.

"After they had climbed in, Helen, wrapping herself tightly in her grey gabardine coat, said, "You must take care of me, Tony. I've never felt so petrified."

In the nearby seats the girls were settling down against their escorts' shoulders, or nuzzling against each other for mutual assurance. The brake-man at the back said, "Hold tight. Here we go," and the carriages began to move with a hurried clanking of ratchets, as if they were being tugged

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upward by an arm of irresistible power. Helen and Spencer were flung back in their seats, their legs raised, their heads thrown back, facing the star-filled sky.

"It's like being tipped-up in a barber's chair," said Spencer. "Undignified but very relaxing."

Near the top of the curve, Helen stretched out her fingertips to balance herself against the metal rail as she threw a frightened glance past Spencer's shoulder at the Pleasure Gardens far below them. The Octopus and the Aerial Torpedoes writhed in a mechanical pattern of green, red and yellow lights next to the Dragon that rolled and unfolded in crystal blue. Beyond them the fountains, driven by the wind, blew in a mist of lime and gold within the steady crescent of lamps from the restaurant.

"All that blackness and brightness . . ." Helen had begun to say, when with a leap the carriage rose over the rim, and flung itself into a vertical hollow of darkness. The girls in the paper hats let out a peal of screams; and screaming, devoted themselves to a delicious terror. Spencer stretched out his right arm, rigidly holding the bar, while with his other arm he held Helen's face pressed against his chest. She didn't speak, but her eyes were clenched as they dived, accelerating with the weight of the carriage towards the wall of the second ascent that rose in front of them. Although he was sheltering her head, Helen's short hair streamed over her face in the wind that tore crying at the metal-work, like a sea-wind at a mast, louder at times than the drilling and clatter of the undercarriage, yet mingling its elemental sound with blasts of music from the fun-fair.

"Are you all right?" Spencer shouted.

"I can't hear you," Helen said, her face still burrowed in his jacket.

"Are you all right?" he shouted again as the carriage began to rise upwards, diminishing its speed.

"Oh, darling, yes, it's lovely."

Again the carriage rose to the topmost ridge, and for a moment it seemed as if it would take off like an aeroplane, soar, stall and drop crashing with its shrieking occupants

among the shooting-galleries and dart-stalls and hot-dog booths in the fair-ground below. Spencer gulped and held Helen's hand, wet with fear, as they dipped again with violent speed into the lattice of girders. He had adjusted himself to the motion, and was watching the back of Helen's neck, the tiny hairs in her nape quivering in the wind, her ears dark with cold, her head bent forward with fear and dependence. He hadn't wanted to see Helen that evening. He had been invited to go to Glyndebourne with a group of Italian actors and actresses, who were in England for a Film Festival. But she had called at his flat, and wept and apologised for what she had said in Cambridge. He had long forgotten what she had said. The evening itself had passed through his memory without leaving a residue. And now, cowering against his shoulder, she seemed to him wearisome, an obligation, different from the arrogant, contemptuous woman who had attracted him by her apparent indifference when he had first met her with her husband.

This time they were falling right into the wind, and the screams of the girls became a sustained wail, confronting the dominant roar of metal and air. Spencer spoke into Helen's ear in a conversational tone.

"I'm sick of you."

She didn't hear the words. She only heard his voice, and, assuming he had expressed a tenderness, said, "Darling, you're so sweet to me."

The carriage rushed downwards, and Spencer, smiling, said again in a louder voice, "I'm sick of you."

In the midst of her terror she opened her eyes into the driving wind, disbelieving what she thought she had heard. Reassured by his smiling face she huddled up to him, but now she was trembling, not with the fear of the Big Dipper, but with the shapeless anxiety that Spencer might leave her, there on the whirling carriage or anywhere else, so that she would be abandoned without help in an infinite, night-marish loneliness.

When they reached the end of the course Spencer said to her, "How did you like it?"

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"Frightful. I'll never go on it again. Tony . . ."

"Yes?"

"Did you—when we were coming down the second dip . . . ?"

"Yes?"

He was walking in the shadows, with his arm lightly round her waist.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "It's all right now."

They sat within a wicker alcove of the Beer Garden by the Thames drinking iced lager, under trees whose leaves were tinted by hidden lights into pastels of silver. Round them in the broken darkness was a private murmur of voices from the neighbouring tables, and from the trestle path across the elm-branches, where occasional couples ~~walked~~ walked among whimsies of illuminated dwarfs and rabbits. The river steamers had ended their night's journeys, but the Showboat on its pile, with its paddles turning idly in mid-air, still played its gusty panatrophe to the emptying gardens.

Helen stirred with her shoe an evening paper that lay at the foot of a slatted chair. In a heavy, black, page-wide streamer, the headline read, "Select Committee On Erskine," and underneath, in bold but smaller type, "Premier's Motion in Commons."

"What happened, Tony?" she asked. "You never tell me what's going on. Were you in the House?"

"Yes, I was," said Spencer. He spoke defiantly, watching her face as if to probe her mood beneath her words. "I think Mr. Erskine's had it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. Damn it all, I've been long enough in the Lobby to know the mood of the House."

He put his long glass on the table and turned to her, excited like a huntsman at the recollection of the day's find.

"It was quite extraordinary," he said, "how the feeling in the Chamber altered. I went in at about ten past three,

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and there weren't a hundred Members there. The Minister of Pensions was answering—all bread and butter stuff."

"That's quite important," Helen said.

"But undramatic. The P.M. didn't have any questions himself, & he didn't turn up till nearly half-past three. By that time the House was absolutely packed—packed. I've seen the Chamber full, but usually there's a handful of Members in the Smoking Room, a few in the Library, some in odd rooms here and there. But this afternoon the place outside the Chamber was like a desert."

"Was Erskine there?" Helen asked.

"Yes," said Spencer. His nostrils stirred with a memory of satisfaction. "He looked subdued. You see, this isn't panning out quite as he expected it to. It's obvious that the P.M.'s been wanting to steamroller the whole affair into the ground. The other day, when Carrington asked his question——"

"Carrington's an odious little beast," said Helen. "He always reminds me of one of those carrion birds that live by picking between the teeth of crocodiles."

"I don't understand you," Spencer said carefully.

"I'm so sorry, Tony," she said. "I interrupted you. Do go on!" She had noticed the matt film that had fallen momentarily over his eyes. "Do go on!"

Spencer took up again the enthusiastic train of his story.

"The Prime Minister tried to laugh it off when Carrington asked him about the rule on gifts to Ministers from foreigners. He said he'd been presented with a gold fountain pen by Harvard, and that if Carrington wanted to take it off him he'd have to fight him for it."

"Did they laugh?"

"Of course they did. The P.M. can always get a laugh from the House. He plays it like an organist. But there's one stop that won't pull, and that's Morgan."

Spencer smiled with delight into the darkness.

"He almost got away with it. It was absolutely touch and go—they were laughing and beginning to walk out when

Morgan got up, in the middle of all the row, and said, "This is no laughing matter." Just like that. "This is no laughing matter." And everybody went quiet, and the chaps who'd begun to walk out took their seats again, and Erskine—he'd half risen too—went white as a shroud and sat down."

"What about today? How was it today?"

"Oh, today the whole thing was pretty formal. Bannister got up and moved that a Select Committee be appointed to inquire into Erskine's conduct in connection with the Anglo-American Agreement—something of that kind. The whole place went deadly quiet when he was speaking, so quiet you could hear Smedley's bronchitis. Erskine sat there without budging till the Old Man had finished. Then he got up and left."

"Poor Michael," Helen said, and added quickly, "I'm sorry, darling. I can't help feeling pity for him, and Jane too. It all happened so suddenly. Only a few weeks ago he was speaking at that special Pilgrims' Dinner. He looked as if there was nothing in the world that could ever bother him. I've never seen anyone in my life who seemed so—so incapable of being touched by anything outside him. Do you think he can survive this?"

Spencer called the waiter, and paid him.

"I don't know," he said. "Statesmen have everything in common with *prima donnas*, except that they never come back—never. A dropped Minister on the back-benches, an ex-M.P. in the Central Lobby—they're sad enough. But a statesman who's been kicked out by his Party—he's a dead duck. If the Committee censures Erskine, I don't see any future for him in the House. His Party won't have him. He may live on as a tolerated back-bencher, if he's got the guts to face things out till the end of this Parliament, and a new lot come in."

"Well, why not?" Helen asked. "Surely his friends would understand."

"I don't think so," said Spencer. "You see, the House of Commons is very much like a school. Everyone knows everyone else. And whatever your politics, you've got to

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conform. You can quarrel with your Whips, you can be a revolutionary bastard, but in your day-to-day life you've got to conform to the code. Don't ask me to tell you what that is. It's a sort of public-school code adapted for the use of elementary schoolboys. They all understand it—Opposition and Government. And you'll notice that the most unpopular Members aren't those with the least popular political views. The unpopular ones are the chaps who don't carry out the code. If Erskine on his official duties conspicuously borrowed money in America, he was breaking the code."

"Conspicuously?"

"Yes. The essence of the code is not to do anything conspicuously wrong." Spencer lit Helen's cigarette, and went on, "Imagine having to walk round those corridors day after day, meeting men who you know are thinking, 'Dirty dog, he let us down.' Imagine having to be pressed into the Division Lobbies with two or three hundred Members who won't talk to you because they despise you."

He breathed the smoke from his cigarette into a congestion of ephemerals leaping round the table lamp. Helen looked at his contented expression, and said, "Why do you hate him so much? It seems so disproportionate. What harm has he ever done you?"

Spencer threw his cigarette into the grate and smothered it with dust.

"He offends my sense of propriety," he said coldly. "Erskine was promoted beyond his intellectual value—successful beyond his worth—arrogant beyond his achievement. I don't hate him. I merely have a passion for social justice."

"But—I must say this—you have made a dead set at him. Your paper's persecuted him ever since the Raberton incident. And now that he's really in a jam, when you were speaking before, you seemed somehow to relish his troubles."

"Relish?" Spencer turned the word over in his mouth inquiringly. "I don't relish them. But don't ask me to feel

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sorry for him either. He's got the troubles he deserves. I'm only sorry for Gascoigne. He's got to look after the Department and the Bill. Shall I take you home?"

Her voice became soft and timid again. "Yes, Tony. It's been a lovely evening."

At the entrance, a party of young men and women, all hatless, were laughing and talking loudly as they jostled each other through the alternately yielding and resisting turnstile. They spread with a relaxed and proprietorial air over the broad steps that led to the fountains and flares, ignoring the drift of visitors towards the exit—the quiet family parties preceded by tired children with balloons and papier mâché prizes.

"I want a coconut," a short young man said. He walked like a horseman in his suit with double vents and narrow trousers. Two of his women companions echoed in excited voices, "A coconut! We want a coconut."

"Hello, Frank," Spencer called out, his arm in Helen's.

"For Heaven's sake, Tony," she said in an undertone, "let's not get caught up with that lot."

"Hello, Frank," Spencer said again.

"Tony!" The young man came stumbling over, and putting his heels together, bowed elaborately as Spencer introduced him to Helen.

Helen nodded and looked away.

"What's the matter with the girl-friend?" the young man asked. "Do you want a coconut or don't you?" he added threateningly.

"Of course we do. Don't we, Helen?"

Spencer pressed his fingers into Helen's upper arm till he felt the muscle crushed against the bone.

"I thought so," said the young man. "We've been having a party—a wonderful party—the biggest . . ."

Like a rubber-kneed homunculus, he moved bouncing off to assemble his friends.

"He's Frank Howlett," said Spencer. "Liddervale's P.R.O., Lord Newfold's second son. Do be friendly, Helen."

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Helen threw his arm from hers, and turned to him with her mouth trembling.

"I've had enough of this, Tony. I simply can't go on. I'll put up with your moods, if you like. But I'm not going to have to put up with the insolence of your drunken friends—not even to help you with Liddle vale. I'm going home."

Spencer listened to her with his eyebrows puckered. When she had finished he said, "I'll see you to a taxi."

"You needn't bother," she said, her anger exhausting itself.

"But of course I will. I don't want it to be thought that I treat my women badly."

They walked a few steps together, and stopped in the shadow of a tree, behind a pavilion striped with dark green and scarlet.

"Darling!" said Spencer.

"Yes?" she answered, not looking up.

He put his hands through her hair behind her ears, feeling her head with the tips of his fingers, and kissed her neck, her chin and her mouth. She allowed him to do it, her hands at her sides.

"Come on, darling," he said. "They're waiting for us."

Howlett returned with his companions and asked, "Drink or coconut?"

"I want a coconut," said a girl whose petulant, disengaged air seemed an element of a general design in which her short curls and her black frock with its pointed white cuffs were also part.

"Hello!" said Spencer.

She looked at him indifferently. "Hello!" she said.

"You're Lavinia Peterhouse. You're at R.A.B.A. We met at Huberton's."

"Did we?" she said. "Got a cigarette?"

He gave her a cigarette, lit it and was about to walk with her when she drew away and took Howlett's arm.

Most of the booths of the fairground had closed. Only the coconut shy remained, surrounded by a crowd of American

servicemen, a few stragglers on their way to the exit, two ambulance men and some children, staring at the coconuts in their metal cups, glowing brilliantly in the darkness.

"Half way for the ladies!" said the tired girl who guarded the cradle of wooden balls.

"Helen?" Spencer asked her if she wanted to throw. She shook her head, anxious for this intervention to be ended so that she might be alone with him again, and his anxious, deferential gaiety with Howlett and his friends, from whom she felt a contemptuous remoteness, might be ended. At Huberton she had spoken for a few moments to Lavinia Peterhouse about the theatre and Aylmer Pocock, the producer, a friend of her husband. Lavinia had asked her for an introduction, and Helen, resolving never to do so, had promised to arrange it when she could. Lavinia now came up to her, and while the others chattered round Howlett, who was throwing wildly and ineffectually at the coconuts, said in apology, "They're so childish. Once they get an idea into their heads . . ."

Helen didn't answer.

Lavinia thought hurriedly of a theme for conversation.

"You must be frightfully busy electioneering, Mrs. Vaughan." She gave an uneasy laugh. "I'm awfully sorry, but I never know which Party your husband belongs to. I suppose it's frightfully hard work."

Helen looked at her fresh colour beneath the organised sophistication of her make-up, and thought, "Twenty-two—twenty-three," and looked from her to Spencer who was leaning casually against the side of the booth.

"What were you saying?" asked Helen.

Lavinia stretched out her toe and put her hand on one hip, in the manner which she had lately learnt when modelling for Femina.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Just that the fun fair must be such a change from electioneering."

She went over to Spencer, and said, "Are you any good?"

"Not much."

"Well, how about getting me a coconut?"

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Spencer didn't take his hands out of his pockets, and Lavinia came closer to him and said, "I suppose you can't."

He didn't move, and Helen, who had come up to them, waited tensely, as if his decision would determine all their future.

"Go on," said Lavinia, giving his arm a slight push.

"All right," he said. "Which one do you want?"

"That one—the one with the beard," said Lavinia, pointing to an isolated coconut in the third row.

"Well, stand away!" he ordered, and threw his first three balls hard against the back canvas.

"More to leg," said Howlett. "Keep 'em down a bit."

The next ball clanged against the support, and bounced high against the protective matting.

"Nearly," Lavinia said in excitement. She had abandoned her pose, and was holding her hands clasped together.

Spencer grinned to her, and picked up three more balls.

Helen was thinking, "I hope he misses, I hope he misses, I hope he misses. Please God, let him miss!" The coconut had become a sign. If he missed, all would be well. Lavinia would go, the evening would end, their days would renew themselves. But if he hit it, she would be defeated, the period of insecurity would begin, their time of love would be over. In the moment that she thought this the wooden ball cracked against a coconut, toppled it into the sawdust, and the onlookers, almost simultaneously, shouted, "Oh!"

"Good shot!" said Howlett. "I want a drink."

"My lovely coconut," said Lavinia. "My lovely, lovely coconut!" She took it from Spencer and swung it by its fibres. "You *are* clever," she said to him. "I may even give you some"

Helen went up to them as they spoke animatedly together, and smiled to Spencer. "That was an awfully good shot. Congratulations!" But he didn't hear her. He was shaking the coconut close to the ear of Lavinia, who was listening to the rattle of its milk, her grey eyes large and wondering, her lips immobile.

On their way out, they passed the roundabouts.

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"Last ride for the night!" the conductor shouted above the panting of Flying Leaves.

"Do let's go on!" said Lavinia. "I feel so wide awake."

Laughing and cheering, all except Spencer and Helen moved towards the step, making their choice of mounts among the glazed horses of the roundabout.

"Are you coming, Helen?" Spencer asked.

"No thanks," she said curtly. "I'm still waiting for you to take me home."

"To-ny!" Lavinia called out. "Aren't you coming?"

"Do come," said Spencer.

"No," said Helen. "Go with your little friend."

Lavinia came back and handed Helen the coconut.

"Be a darling," she said, "and hold this for me."

She and Spencer climbed on to a horse with a wide, open mouth, Lavinia in front, Spencer behind her, clutching the thick, brass spiral between them. From the ground Helen watched the roundabout start, with the horses rising in their graceful wave-like rhythm, round and round, faster and faster, till at last, in full career, amid the jangling of the organ, the sudden triumphant blasts of its hooter and the cries of the riders, it turned in a dizzy, sustained waltz that made her shut her eyes and put her hand on the rim of a stall table for support. When she looked up again the roundabout was slowing down. Lavinia was laughing in exhaustion, with her head thrown back, against Spencer's shoulder, and he, both arms around her waist, was smiling comfortably.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Select Committee

"IN A SENSE, sir," said the Attorney General, peering from his place at the end of the horse-shoe table towards the Chairman, Sir Henry Wigmore, who added a new diagonal to the shape he was drawing, "In a sense, sir, we are required to play Hamlet without the ghost."

The ten members of the Select Committee all laughed, except for Bob Thompson, an Opposition Member, who muttered to his neighbour, Colonel Carter-Budd, "He means without the Prince."

"You will have heard," the Attorney General went on, "how time after time the threads of this otherwise uncomplicated case have led back to Mr. Curtis, or Mr. Collindale as he appears to call himself, that curious and elusive figure, who crosses and recrosses our scene, only to disappear when we have sought to invite him to meet us."

The Chairman interrupted him.

"Mr. Attorney, we have already considered your suggestion in connection with Mr. Curtis. We considered it when we formulated our procedure. He is an American citizen. We are not in a position to require his presence."

The Attorney General, who was addressing the Committee, seated, leaned back in his chair.

"That, sir," he said, "is a matter which had not escaped me. As I see it, my part in these proceedings is to expose to the Committee the circumstances and the material which are the origin of this present investigation. The only point I wished to make at this stage was that Mr. Curtis, though absent, has been the agent by means of whom we have in our possession Document Six . . ."

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The Members of the Committee turned the leaves of the clip of documents before them on the table.

"... which is crucial to the inquiry. Document Six is the photostat of an affidavit sworn by Lady Applebourn—whom I have already mentioned—an affidavit purporting to establish the fact and nature of a loan by Mr. Curtis to Mr. Erskine. The Committee, then, may have to forgo the testimony of Mr. Curtis. It will, of course, have the benefit of Mr. Erskine's own evidence on the matter. Sir, I will not weary the Committee by taking it through the details of the documents."

"I think they are clear," said the Chairman, beginning a spheroidal doodle. "Are you prepared to formulate the issues to be submitted for the consideration of this Committee?"

The Attorney General said, "I was about to do so, sir. They are, briefly: did Mr. Erskine corruptly accept a gift or payment in respect of any action which he took or might take in connection with the Anglo-American Agreement? Did he while in America enter into any illegal, improper or scandalous financial arrangement?" He put the questions deliberately and emphatically, and ended, addressing himself to the picture on the wall, "The Committee has, I believe, a sufficiency of material on which it can form its conclusions as to . . ." he read from the paper in front of him ". . . as to whether the conduct of the right honourable Member was contrary to the usage or derogatory to the dignity of the House, or inconsistent with the standard which Parliament is entitled to expect from its Members."

The Chairman turned to Andrew Jeffreys, Q.C., M.P., whom Erskine had asked to act as his counsel. Jeffreys, known as "Documentation Jeffreys" from his habit of always carrying with him on his professional occasions an elaborate and heavy corpus of reference, rose and said, "If you please, sir. In this hearing, I am at the disposal of the Committee to conform with whatever procedure may be established. If it would be for your convenience, I will, however, reserve my observations for a later stage."

The Chairman nodded to the Attorney General.

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"I will call Mr. Spencer," the Attorney General said. The Clerk left the Committee Room and returned with Spencer, who had been standing alone in the corridor outside, apart from the three other groups of witnesses. He stood in front of the table, took the oath on the Bible that the Clerk handed him, and waited. In his grey flannel suit, his dark hair brushed back, his bearing alert and friendly, he looked like an applicant for a job.

"What is your full name?" asked the Attorney General.

"Anthony Hallam, Browning Spencer."

"Poetic!" Thompson whispered, and Spencer flushed.

"Your occupation?"

"I am a journalist."

"How long have you been engaged in that profession?"

"About ten years."

"Before that?"

"I was in the R.A.F."

"You are what is called a lobby-correspondent?"

"That is so, sir. My more formal description would be, I think, political correspondent for Consolidated Newspapers, Ltd."

"In that connection you know Mr. Erskine?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have commented on his political activities?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have lately paid special attention in your newspapers to the Anglo-American Agreement, in which, of course, Mr. Erskine had a role of some importance?"

"Yes, sir."

"And it was as part of that commentary that you drew attention to a financial transaction between a Mr. Curtis and Mr. Erskine?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask why you decided to provide the Prime Minister with the affidavit—Document Six—which we have since studied?"

Spencer gazed through the windows towards the Thames

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and the buildings of St. Thomas's Hospital. Then he looked straight at the Attorney General.

"It seemed to me, sir, that the matter was now no longer one of political opinion. I felt the whole public interest was involved. That was why I felt obliged to bring the affidavit to the attention of higher authority."

"And Mr. Curtis. Did he give you any reason for his desire to publish the affidavit?"

"No, sir. The only impression I formed was that he wanted to get his money back."

A few members of the Committee smiled, and the Attorney General said, "Thank you."

"Is that all, sir?" Spencer asked.

Jeffreys tucked his robe round his waist. "How long have you known Mr. Curtis?" he asked.

"Not long," said Spencer calmly. "We met by chance a few weeks ago."

"But he had remarkable confidence in you—very rapidly?"

Spencer turned to the Chairman. "Really, sir, I'm scarcely able to judge."

The Chairman's pencil enlarged a big black dot.

"We are," he said, "asking the witness for his observations, not for his estimate of some other person's impressions."

"With respect, sir," said Jeffreys, "I was about to ask the witness, in order to measure Mr. Curtis's confidence rather more concretely, whether he did in fact pay Mr. Curtis a thousand pounds for the affidavit."

Spencer hesitated. "Consolidated Newspapers Ltd. paid the thousand pounds. I handed over the cheque."

"Which cheque?" asked the Chairman.

"Document Nine is a reproduction of the cheque," said Jeffreys. The stiff papers crackled as the members referred to them.

"Now, Mr. Spencer, will you tell the Committee whether you paid out this large sum in the interest of the public or of your newspaper's circulation?"

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"The matter was—and is—one of vast public interest. The more widely it was known, well, the better. My answer to your question, sir, is in the interest of both."

Jeffreys reflected before asking his next question, and Spencer confidently put his hands in his pockets.

"You have in the past raised matters of public interest which have had the attention of the Committee of Privilege. And before you answer me, would you be good enough to take your hands out of your pockets?"

The Chairman frowned at Jeffreys, but said to Spencer, "It would be more decorous."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Spencer, and turned to Jeffreys with his mouth compressed.

"Perhaps you will now answer my question," said Jeffreys.

"I have never said or done anything which has been brought before the Committee of Privilege," said Spencer. "There was an occasion when a Member of Parliament charged me in the House with a breach of privilege, when I wrote a paragraph describing a solo dance he did at a party. The Speaker rejected it on the grounds that there was not a *prima facie* case."

The Attorney General looked up with an amused expression.

The Chairman interrupted. "I don't think it would be profitable to pursue this line of inquiry."

"Very well," said Jeffreys, and sat down.

"Mr. McQueen," the Chairman called.

"I was only going to ask," McQueen said in his slow, tuneful voice, "whether the witness considers it right to pay money for information that may be mere libel?"

"Yes, sir," said Spencer. "The police and the Press do it every day."

"With your permission, Mr. Chairman," said Jeffreys, rising again. "You will recall, Mr. Spencer, that your colleagues in the Lobby passed in their association a vote of censure on you on February 4th for the reckless disclosure of information—info, I believe you would call it

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—statistical information which you obtained from a junior civil servant, now dismissed?"

Spencer stared back at him with dislike.

"Info, sir, is a word I would not use."

Jeffreys waved his hand deprecatingly, and resumed his seat.

When Laird, the next witness, had taken the oath and given his name, the Attorney General said, "You are Mr. Erskine's Private Secretary?"

Laird ran his fingers through his hair and said, "Indeed I am, sir."

"How long have you held that position?"

"Since Mr. Erskine's return from America, sir."

"You see all his correspondence in the Private Office—meet all his visitors?"

"All or almost all." Laird put his hands on the chair in front of him, and balanced himself.

"Did you meet a man called Curtis at the Ministry on June 10th?"

"It was a Wednesday, I can't be sure of the date. But I remember him well. He telephoned the Minister in the morning, and then called round. I remember I had to fit him in on a busy morning. We had our usual Press Conference that day."

"Did he announce himself as Curtis?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you present at his interview with Mr. Erskine?"

"I was there when Mr. Curtis greeted the Minister, and when he left."

"What was the nature of his greeting?"

"Affable."

"And of his departure?"

"Ferocious."

The Attorney General pointed his finger at Laird, who stopped rocking his chair.

"Now, will you tell the Committee the subject of the interview?"

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"Well, it's really hard for me to say. I know it was about machine-tool licences, because I'd got out the file. But when the Minister rang for me the file was where I'd put it, unopened."

"But the purpose of the interview was to deal with machine-tools?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you very much."

Jeffreys moved in front of the Committee's table, and said, "You spoke of Mr. Curtis's greeting as being affable. On whose side? Was it mutual?"

"I was rather startled by Mr. Curtis's appearance and manner." Laird looked down at his own dark trousers as if for reassurance.

"Mr. Curtis stretched out his hand and said, 'Hello, Mike.' It was the first time I'd heard anyone call the Minister 'Mike.' I don't recall the Minister's reply."

"But when Mr. Curtis left—how did you put it—'ferociously,' did you have the impression that he had had a satisfactory interview?"

"Oh, no, the very reverse."

"So that if the subject of the interview had been machine-tools, Mr. Curtis would seem to have received certain answers which would scarcely have prospered his own interest in the matter?"

"That is inferential," said the Chairman.

"What else did you hear of the discussion?" Jeffreys continued. "You were in the next room, I presume."

"I heard very angry voices."

"Whose?"

"Mr. Erskine's chiefly."

"And what was the form of words he used in bidding Mr. Curtis good-bye?"

"His exact words?"

"If you remember them."

"His exact words were, 'Do what you like. As far as I'm concerned you can go to hell.'"

Jeffreys nodded, and took his seat.

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"I assume," said McQueen, "that it was unusual for you to hear high and angry voices in the next room."

"Most unusual, sir," said Laird.

"Was it, in fact, unique?"

"Yes—unique."

"And what were your feelings in the matter? I mean when you came into the room?"

Laird smoothed his hair. "Civil servants have no feelings," he said. "I handed Mr. Curtis his hat."

"I will now call Mr. Scott-Palmer," said the Attorney General. "And perhaps it will be for the convenience of the Committee if I add that, apart from the Treasury witnesses, whom I will call for corroborative purposes, Mrs. Erskine will be my final witness."

Scott-Palmer stood erect in front of the Committee, with only an occasional movement of his left hand to the pen-knife at the end of his chain in his waistcoat pocket. The Attorney General took him step by step through the processes of his visit to America with Erskine, confirming in detail the development of the Machine Tool Agreement to the time of its conclusion in Washington.

"What part did you personally have in determining these arrangements?" he asked.

"None, sir. I was, so to speak, in attendance. A Parliamentary Private Secretary is the amœba of Ministerial life."

"When I was a medical student," McQueen said, "an amœba was defined as a microscopic animalcule perpetually changing shape."

Scott-Palmer adjusted his tightly fitting collar. "That definition in some respects seems adequate," he said.

"I think we'd better get on," said the Chairman.

"Let us come to the night of May 10th—that is the date given in the affidavit, Document Six," said the Attorney General. "You were acquainted with Mr. Calshaw?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Delfiglio?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Mr. Curtis?"

"Yes, sir."

"They all had something to do with negotiating the Agreement?"

"Mr. Calshaw and Mr. Delfoglio, yes. Mr. Curtis seemed merely to be their—familiar. His job seemed to be to fetch and carry. He seemed to have a different responsibility."

"To entertain, perhaps?"

Scott-Palmer took his penknife from his pocket, and twined the chain round his finger.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. That was certainly one of his duties. I sat in on the discussions—as he did. He never said anything, but he was always on hand to pour out the drinks."

"Let us take this a little further. On the night of May 10th—had the Agreement been signed?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Curtis arrived at your hotel—Mr. Erskine's hotel—in order to celebrate the occasion?"

"Well, not exactly. There was a party of sorts."

"That is to say, there was a certain amount of drinking?" the Chairman put in.

"Yes," said Scott-Palmer. "Mr. Curtis later invited the Minister and myself to go in his car to some other party. I understood it to be in the nature of a celebration."

"Did you accept this invitation?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Oh, very simply. I was tired."

"Any other reason?"

"No, other reason—but I felt especially tired at the prospect of an evening in Mr. Curtis's society."

"Did you dislike him—disapprove of him?"

"Yes."

"Did you have specific reasons for your dislike and disapproval?"

"No. My feeling was instinctive. He struck me as being a fraud. I was sorry that the Minister tolerated him."

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"And on Mr. Erskine's return, did you discuss the night's entertainment with him?"

"No, I was in bed. He didn't talk about it next day. Neither did I."

The Attorney General paused, and examined his notes. "One further matter. You looked after the financial arrangements of the delegation. What was your allowance—and Mr. Erskine's?"

"It was up to eight pounds a day. And there was a special account for entertaining."

"Document 'Twelve," said the Chairman. "What did Mr. Erskine draw from the entertainment account?"

"Nothing at all. The delegation gave one official cocktail party, in Washington, and that was all."

The Attorney General played with the documents, tapping them on the table.

"Could Mr. Erskine at any time have been able—legitimately—to make a payment of two thousand seven hundred dollars to Mr. Curtis from the resources made available to him by the Treasury, or with Treasury permission?"

"No, sir."

"I am obliged."

During the adjournment, Erskine, Jane and Jeffreys, who had taken the slow, clanking lift from the Committee to the Terrace Floor, sat in the cafeteria eating a meal of ham and salad that Jeffreys had brought on a tray from the serving counter. In the corner by the window they spoke quietly to each other, ignored by the secretaries and officials of the House at the nearby tables.

"I was quite petrified when I first came in," said Jane, "but they were all so sweet."

Jeffreys said, "There was nothing to worry about."

"I know," said Jane, "but it was strange standing there—oh, you know, just like a criminal. And in front of people we know so well. There were at least three of the Committee who'd had dinner with us in the last three months. The Attorney himself. It was so peculiar answering his solemn

questions. I kept wanting to call him Edgar. And I could hardly stop myself calling the Chairman Harry."

She smiled, and her eyes filled with tears as she prodded the salad with her fork.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Erskine," said Jeffreys soothingly. "I think it's all going very nicely. The Attorney was very fair in his opening. That first half-hour of his, filling in the background—you weren't there—but it was scrupulously objective. I was looking at the Committee, and I assure you—apart from Thompson, possibly McQueen—there's no one who wouldn't like to come to a decision, and a favourable one, now. You see, there's only the affidavit. I've challenged that already. I think it's a dud. When I call Hargreaves he'll be able to tell us something about the American solicitors as well as about Curtis. Aren't you eating your salad, Michael?"

"No," said Erskine. His mind had been wandering to the day at Lords that he had promised Robert. "No," he repeated.

"In that case, I'll have it," said Jeffreys. He went on speaking with two leaves of lettuce protruding from the corners of his mouth.

To avoid the Hansard reporters and journalists who were gathered round the lift, they walked up the stairs to the Inner Lobby, where already a number of Members of Parliament and their guests were waiting for the Speaker's Procession.

"If we hurry," said Erskine, looking at his watch which said twenty-five past two, "we'll manage to avoid it."

But at that moment the policeman at the Library Corridor entrance gave a long-drawn echoing shout of "Spea-ker!" and the Members and visitors lining each side of the Lobby fell silent, the Members at attention, the policeman with his helmet doffed, as the regular, symmetrical tread of the unseen procession drew nearer.

In the manner of a formalised dance, a pavane, the Speaker and his attendants appeared from round the corner. The usher in his knee-breeches beat the rhythm with his slow march. The Sergeant-at-Arms behind him, old and proud and slightly inclined under the weight of the five-foot,

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silver-gilt mace, moved in a resolute harmony. Erskine and Jeffreys both bowed as the mace went by, and a second later bowed again to the Speaker, who, with his long black train supported by his personal attendant, formed the apex of the procession. Observed from every angle, the top of his full wig rose above the heads of the others. Carrying his black tricorn in one hand, he moved towards the crowds, circled behind the police in the Central Lobby with the self-conscious absorption of one who symbolises the majesty of Parliament. For a second he looked at Erskine. But then he was past, his chaplain and secretary following him, and the group in the Lower Waiting Hall closed in behind the procession as from the Central Lobby came a new shout from the policeman on duty, "Hats off, strangers!" Every head was bared, including those of the policemen—a sudden denuding of their authority that gave them personality and diminished their stature.

"Is that all?" a schoolgirl of about fourteen asked Erskine in a whisper. She had been waiting for half an hour, and her Admission Order was crumpled in her hand.

"That's all," Erskine said, smiling to her. "But you wait till you get in for Questions. That's when the fun starts."

"Oh," said the girl, looking vaguely round for the Member who had brought her. "It all happened so quickly. Have you seen it before?"

"Yes," said Erskine.

"Come on, Michael," said Jane.

"Who's that?" the schoolgirl asked, pointing to a marble bust.

"That's Oliver Cromwell," said Erskine. "You can tell by his wart."

"Are you an M.P.?" the girl asked.

"Yes," said Erskine.

"Will you give me your autograph, please?" she asked.

Erskine saw some visitors staring at him. He patted the child on the cheek. "Not now. I'm sorry . . ."

"Oh, please."

"No! Go away!" he said in sudden exasperation.

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As they went up the stone stairs, Jane said, "Darling, you mustn't get so angry."

"I know," he said miserably. "That poor child. I'm disgusted with myself."

"Yes," said Jeffreys. "She is, after all, a mother's child. She might have been your own constituent."

An hour later Jeffreys was examining Erskine, whom the Chairman with deliberate courtesy had asked to sit.

"Where did you meet Mr. Curtis?"

"The first time, in Washington. The only time I was alone with him was in New York."

"What was the date of that New York meeting?"

"It was May 10th."

"What was the date of the Anglo-American Agreement?"

"We signed the Agreement two days earlier, in Washington, on May 8th."

Jeffreys repeated the date, and said, "Had you previously had any financial discussions with Mr. Curtis?"

"No, none."

"Where did you first have any financial transaction—whatever its cause or origin—with this gentleman?"

Erskine hesitated. Then he said, "If it can be described as a financial transaction, on May 10th. There was a cocktail party at our hotel in New York. Afterwards Curtis suggested that we should go on to another party. I'd sent my own car away—my official car—and he offered his, a Cadillac."

"That appears to have made some impression on you," said McQueen.

"It did," Erskine answered. "Its size seemed out of proportion to Curtis's importance."

"And then?" asked Jeffreys.

"We came to a place in Jersey. To my surprise, it turned out to be some kind of restaurant and gaming house."

"What was your reaction to that?"

"My reaction was unfavourable. But I was in a difficulty because of Curtis's importunities, and because—quite shortly—I depended on him for transport."

"You took part in the gambling?"

"Yes. For small stakes. I had a few dollars. Less than a hundred, I know."

"What game did you play?"

"Roulette."

"Are you an experienced player?"

Erskine smiled. "I've played once or twice abroad. But I was ill at ease. I regarded myself as doomed to lose the few dollars I had, and wanted to have done with the thing as quickly as possible. I put my money on numbers."

"Did Mr. Curtis play?"

"Yes. He played chiefly on colours. He played for some time after I'd lost."

"At what point in the evening did he offer you a loan?"

"At no point. He had a pile of counters in front of him. He'd bought a lot to begin with. When I'd lost my own stock of counters, he said—do you want his exact words?"

"If you please."

"He said, 'Want some chips, Michael? Let's have some Anglo-American co-operation. We'll play from the bank.'"

"I understood him to mean that he wanted me—perhaps as a gesture of hospitality—to use his winnings as a common pool."

"Thank you, Mr. Erskine."

The Chairman glanced towards the Attorney General, who said, "One or two points, Mr. Erskine. What time did the game end?"

"Some time in the early hours of the morning."

"Were you then winning?"

"No. I had lost all the chips I'd drawn from Curtis's pile."

"What was their value?"

"A few thousand dollars."

"What about Mr. Curtis? Was he winning?"

"I don't really know. He cashed a lot of his chips about an hour before we left."

"Did Mr. Curtis make any reference to a loan that evening?"

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"No."

"When did he first refer to it?"

"The following day, when the American negotiators came to see us off, he referred to it. Rather darkly. I didn't know what he was getting at. The second time was in England, when he called at the House of Commons."

"Did you make any attempt to settle this debt?"

"I did not regard it as a debt. Neither—that evening—did Curtis. When I referred afterwards to his generosity during the game, he said, 'Forget it.'"

"And you did?"

"Yes, I did."

Thompson laughed out loud.

"When you saw him in England did he ask you to pay in pounds or dollars?"

"He said he wanted neither. He was prepared to wipe out the debt if I did him a service."

"What was the nature of the service?"

"He wanted me to allocate licences to a company he represented. He called to see me at the Ministry."

"What reply did you make to this—to this proposition?"

"I told him to go to hell. He said, 'I have my dignity, Mr. Erskine.' I then rang for my secretary, told Curtis again to go to hell, and I haven't seen him since."

"Thank you," said the Attorney General.

Colonel Carter-Budd said, "Perhaps I may ask a few questions that come to mind." He looked at Erskine severely.

"Are you a man of means, Mr. Erskine?"

"Of small means," said Erskine. "I have spent most of my adult life in public service. I have neither sought nor found opportunities for personal enrichment."

"But you have some private income, adequate for your needs?"

"Yes."

"You have in the past, when you were in Opposition, held company directorships?"

"No, sir. I have always declined any directorships which I have been offered. It has seemed to me that they would

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limit my ability to speak freely in Parliament on industrial and economic question."

"Would you consider it incompatible with your position as a Member of Parliament to receive any sum of money for the specific purpose of promoting a cause or an interest in Parliament?"

"Certainly. I would regard that as a betrayal of public trust."

"Would that apply to a Trade Union Member—a Member of Parliament subsidised by his Union?" Carter-Budd asked.

"No," said Erskine. "I make a distinction between legitimate assistance given to a Member of Parliament in order to enable him to engage in public service from which he otherwise might be excluded—I mean by a lack of resources—I make a distinction between that and what is nothing more nor less than a bribe."

"In that case," said Thompson, who had been opening and closing his mouth waiting for a chance to speak, "how will you explain the fact that you accepted money, and this is really the question: how did you come to take money from the agent—we heard something about his background from the representative of the U.S. Embassy—the agent of a company that you had been actually doing business with on behalf of Britain? There's the real question," he said, turning triumphantly to the other members of the Committee.

"Sir," said Erskine. "I recognise on reflection that it was foolish of me to have placed myself in a compromising and ambiguous position. I should not have gone with Curtis that night. But the fact is that a man in a public position is readily available, and may sometimes fall into indiscretion out of sheer politeness. I can only say to the Committee that had I known in New York what I understand the Committee has heard today about Curtis, I would not have allowed him near me. As it is, I must repeat what I said at the outset. At no time did I accept a loan from Curtis in consideration of anything that I had done or would do. The

circumstances of the Jersey visit"—he shrugged his shoulders—"they were fortuitous."

"Thank you, Mr. Erskine," said the Chairman.

"Oh, just one small matter," the Attorney General added.

"Do you know a Lady Applebourne?"

"I do. I met her with Curti—once."

"Did she accompany you on your evening party?" He spoke the last two words in quotation marks.

"Yes," said Erskine.

"I am obliged," said the Attorney General, and put his arm over the back of his chair comfortably.

The Chairman said, "I think we may now adjourn till Thursday. We are anxious, Mr. Attorney, to complete our business with the least possible delay. That, I think, meets your own wishes."

The Attorney General nodded, and the Committee, with a stirring of chairs and a release of general conversation, rose.

"How was it?" Erskine asked Jeffreys as soon as they had left the room.

"Excellent," said Jeffreys. "It's all going well. I'm not in the least bit worried."

Jane came hurrying up to them from her bench in the corridor. "Well?"

Erskine grinned. "All is well. Come on, darling. We'll go somewhere private and have a drink."

At the far end of the corridor, Spencer was talking to a slender woman whose ash-blond hair contrasted with her black straw hat.

"Why didn't they tell me they didn't want me today?" the woman said in a loud, clipped voice. "Are they trying to make a fool of me?"

"But Lady Applebourne . . ." Spencer's voice trailed away in argument.

Jane held Erskine's arm.

"Darling," she said anxiously, "is anything the matter? You're trembling."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lady Applebourne

"THE COMMITTEE HADN'T intended to call any further evidence," said the Chairman. "But our proceedings haven't been entirely in accord with the practice in Courts of Law. And necessarily so . . ."

"No, no. Quite," said the Attorney General from the end of the table. Jeffreys nodded without looking up from his papers.

"I propose, therefore," the Chairman went on, "to hear the evidence of Lady Applebourne—if the Committee is so minded."

"I am grateful, sir," the Attorney General said.

When Lady Applebourne came into the room, wearing a small black hat trimmed with white and a black barathea suit, he rose, and the Chairman and the others of the Committee rose too. Lady Applebourne gave a slight inclination of her head, a gentle assurance that she wished them to be at their ease and that they might sit. In the morning light, her face was petalled against the heavy oak furnishings and the frame of her own fashionable, yet strangely widowing clothes. Her voice when she took the oath was subdued, defenceless, scarcely heard.

"You are Lady Applebourne," asked the Attorney General, moderating his normally robust manner of speech.

"Yes."

"Your age . . . ?"

Lady Applebourne looked quickly round her, half smiled as she caught the benevolent expressions of the Committee, and said, "Oh—thirty-five."

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"Your profession?"

"I have independent means."

She crossed her legs, then uncrossed them, and kept them slanting with her skirt smoothed over her knees.

"You have been good enough to volunteer to give evidence before the Committee. What connection have you with the matter before us?"

"I live in New York."

"Yes . . ."

"I was there at the same time as Mr. Erskine."

"Yes."

"I met him when all this business was going on. And when I read about the Select Committee in the Press . . . I thought it my duty to come here, and tell you what I know."

"That was very public-spirited of you," said the Attorney General. "Now let's begin at the beginning. How long have you known Mr. Erskine?"

"Since April."

"Where did you first meet him?"

"At a cocktail party given by a friend—Mr. Curtis."

"What was the date of that party?"

She hesitated, then answered, "I don't remember the exact date. All I remember is that it was a day or two after the signing of the Anglo-American Machine Tool Agreement. I remember because lots of toasts were being drunk."

"Mr. Erskine was happy?"

"I don't want to make any difficulty," Jeffreys interrupted, "but I understood from my learned friend that he was going to confine his examination to questions of fact rather than opinion."

"May I put it differently," said the Attorney: "Did Mr. Erskine content himself with the celebration in which he was engaged . . . or did he seek further entertainment?"

One or two of the Committee laughed.

"He was in a gay mood," said Lady Applebourne with a small pucker of her eyebrows. "You know—relaxed and glad he'd got his work over. He said he'd like to go on

somewhere, and asked me if I'd accompany him. I'm always happy to look after visitors from Britain, and I asked Mr. Curtis if he'd care to make up a small party. He said he would. . . ."

"Tell us what happened, then, Lady Applebourne."

"There were three cars," she said. "Full of our friends. Mr. Erskine said he'd like to see something exciting, so we thought we'd go to Jersey."

"Did you put the roulette suggestion to Mr. Erskine?"

"Oh, no. We made a few alternative suggestions, but he said he'd like to play roulette."

"Did any of Mr. Erskine's staff accompany you?"

"No. I said we ought to invite Mr. Scott-Palmer, but Mr. Erskine said he couldn't be bothered with that frightful drip!"

Almost every member of the Committee laughed, and then fell silent at the impropriety.

"Yes, that's what he called him," said Lady Applebourne, but the Committee had already stiffened, and her words were like the underlining of a jest.

"I would like you now to say exactly what happened at this gaming place," the Attorney General said crisply. "What was it called?"

"It's known as Ed's Place."

"I see. Is it a club? Has it a membership?"

"In a way, yes. You have to be known there—and introduced."

"Would you regard it as a suitable . . ." he pondered the word, "a suitable resort for a Minister of Her Majesty's Government?"

"It depends," she said slowly. "I think Ministers have been known to gamble and play cards. . . ."

"Not since Charles James Fox," said Thompson.

"But in a place of this kind," the Attorney General insisted. "Roulette, if I am not mistaken, is illegal in most parts of the United States."

"I believe so," said Lady Applebourne. "It's illegal, but tolerated."

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"So that Mr. Erskine chose to accompany you to a gambling resort which although tolerated was illegal."

"I suppose so."

"Let us go on a little," said the Attorney, putting his glasses on the table. "Did you take part in this gaming?"

"No."

"Did you spend much time with Mr. Erskine?"

"Practically the whole time."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, I liked him—and besides, he was getting rather animated."

"Animated?"

"Yes. . . . We'd come from a lively cocktail party."

"You mean he was intoxicated?"

"No, I mean he was animated."

The Attorney General shook his head in a friendly manner, and said, "Yes. I see. Animated. . . . You watched him play?"

"Yes."

"Did he win or lose?"

"Oh, he lost very quickly. He kept putting his money on numbers, and, as you can imagine, he soon lost."

"Did he want to stop?"

"Oh, no. Not a bit. The bug had got hold of him. We both—Mr. Curtis and I—tried to persuade him to stop. He simply wouldn't. He borrowed—I think—about fifty dollars from Mr. Curtis—and then, he kept borrowing more and more, till eventually he owed him the earth."

"How much is that exactly?"

"I remember Mr. Curtis saying, 'Steady on, Mike. It's two thousand five hundred. And you don't have a chance unless you hit the jackpot.'"

"What did Mr. Erskine say to that?"

"He said, 'Don't worry. You'll get your money back.' And, 'Stop bloody well counting.'"

"I see. . . . How did Mr. Erskine take his losses?"

"He didn't seem to worry very much. He was pretty high."

"High?"

"I'm sorry. It's an Americanism I've picked up. Pretty merry. . . ."

"Merry with drink?"

"I suppose so."

"And then?"

"Then we drove home—Mr. Curtis, Mr. Erskine and myself. Mr. Curtis stopped off at his flat, and the chauffeur took us on in his car."

"Did you have any further discussion with Mr. Erskine?"

"Not really. He wanted to come in for a good-night drink."

"Did he do so?"

Lady Applebourne raised her face to the Chairman.

"Must I answer that question?" she said. "Mr. Erskine——"

"Did . . . ?" Thompson began.

"I think we'll leave Mr. Erskine at the door," the Chairman said.

When the Attorney General had indicated with a summary wave of the hand that he had finished with his witness, Jeffreys, addressing a smile to Lady Applebourne who gave him a brief, interested nod in return, rose to question her. For a few seconds he referred to a document in his hand, and then said in a kindly voice, "You stated that your age was thirty-five."

Lady Applebourne hesitated, made as if to reply, and was silent.

"I think you are over thirty-eight," Jeffreys went on, holding the copy of her birth certificate for her to see.

"I have no wish to pose as being young," said Lady Applebourne. "You have my certificate, and that settles the matter."

"Really!" said Carter-Budd to his neighbour in a mutter. "What a sordid trap!"

Jeffreys overheard him, and turned to the Chairman with a slight flush on his cheekbones.

"At the moment, sir," he said, "I am on the question of

credit. Your maiden name?" he went on, facing Lady Applebourne again.

"Esther Parker," she said.

"Esther Mary Parker," Jeffreys read slowly from the birth certificate.

"You have been married twice, I think."

"Yes."

Jeffreys shuffled his papers, groping for a report, and said, "Your second husband was Anselm Tupper Macnally. You were divorced—when?"

"Three years ago—on the grounds of cruelty—his to me," she added quickly.

"I see. The title you use is, so to speak, an honorary reversion."

"I don't understand," she said, looking at him with antipathy.

"The point will, no doubt, be taken by the Committee. Now tell me—Lady Applebourne—how long have you lived in America?"

"Eighteen years."

"And you are of independent means?"

"Yes."

"Are you taking into account the petition of bankruptcy filed against you in the name of Macnally?"

She didn't answer.

"Well?" His voice was aggressive.

"That didn't affect my means—the alimony after my divorce or my income from the estate of my first husband."

"But the alimony was in arrears, and the income was derisory?"

Lady Applebourne had now measured the hostility of Jeffreys' questions, and changed her posture. Instead of answering with a coquettish complaisance, she expressed a sincere bewilderment that having come to give evidence about Erskine, she found herself giving evidence about herself.

"Yes," she said. "My income was small—terribly small. That's why I went out to work for a time."

Thompson nodded his head in energetic approval.

"Yes," said Jeffreys. "Yes . . . I'm glad you mentioned that. What sort of work did you do . . . when you went out to work?"

She began to count her jobs on her fingers, and her emerald ring glowed against her dark suit.

"Well, first of all, I worked in a flower shop. . . . Arranging flowers for hotels. Then I sold gowns for six months. I presented the models. You know, they liked my English accent."

"I see," said Jeffreys. "When did your association with Hendryk Curtis begin?"

"Association?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite know what you mean by association."

"I will tell you. Did you—two years ago—begin to give parties for his business friends and contacts at your flat?"

"I sometimes entertained for Mr. Curtis."

"Who paid for the entertainment?"

"Mr. Curtis."

"What fee were you paid?"

"Fee?"

"Yes, fee."

She shrugged her shoulders, and said, "It all depended."

"On what?"

"They were business parties. Mr. Curtis didn't pay me a fixed fee. It depended on—oh, on all sorts of things. If they were important buyers, I suppose the fee would be bigger."

"But Mr. Curtis had a home of his own?"

"Mr. Curtis is very happily married. His wife——"

"I'm not asking about his wife."

"What were you about to say, Lady Applebourne?" the Chairman asked.

"I was only going to say," she replied with a reproachful look to Jeffreys who was poised on his toes like a boxer, "that Mr. Curtis has a very nice wife. She's a musician. She plays the clarinet, and they've got four sweet children."

"Yes," said Jeffreys impatiently. "Why did Curtis prefer to entertain at your flat instead of at his home?"

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"Really," said Lady Applebourne. "I do ask your protection, Mr. Chairman, against these insinuations."

"Perhaps . . ." the Chairman began.

"I will pass from that point," said Jeffreys. "You were Curtis's hostess when he was entertaining men with whom he was seeking to do business—on whose behalf?"

"His own, I suppose. I never inquired."

"Are you familiar with the name United Middleton Machine Tool Corporation?"

"Of course—everyone is."

"And the Ecclin Vertical Borer Corporation?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that the Machine Tool Corporation dismissed Curtis from its employment shortly before this Committee began to sit?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that the Borer Corporation dismissed Curtis on his return to the U.S.A.—after his failure to obtain the licences he'd promised them?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"Are you not associated with Curtis in a deep-seated and malicious grudge against Mr. Erskine for his refusal to advance your financial interests?"

"It's untrue—untrue. Absolutely untrue." She rapped with her knuckle on her knee.

"Very well," said Jeffreys. "Who paid for your visit to this country?"

"I paid myself."

"Did you?" said Jeffreys. "Are you sure? Is that Mr. Curtis's signature?"

After she had glanced at it, he handed a photostatic copy of a cheque, payable to a New York travel agency, and signed in a small, neat hand, 'H. Curtis,' to the Chairman, who examined it and passed it to his neighbours.

"May I ask how this document comes into our possession?" the Chairman asked.

"Messrs Wirth, Jensen and Harker, have been acting on behalf of my client in the United States. They have been

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asked to obtain certain evidence in connection with Lady Applebourne and Mr. Erskine, and they seem to have shown both enterprise and skill in doing so."

"Enterprise is an inadequate word," said the Chairman with grave irony. Jeffreys bowed, and said, "I am obliged, sir. I will convey your expression of regard to our agents."

The Attorney General, affecting disinterest in Jeffreys' cross-examination, had been watching a flight of gulls that had settled outside on the stone ledge of the windows. When the document reached him he gave it a glance and flicked it back on the table, as if to suggest its irrelevance.

"Well, let's get back to the dramatic night out with Mr. Erskine. You've told us you liked him, Lady Applebourne."

"Yes."

"You combined business with inclination when you took him to Jersey."

She was silent.

"Mr. Curtis—your intimate—wanted you to be friendly with Mr. Erskine, to keep him happy. . . . Will you answer?"

"I do not see," the Attorney General interposed, "how Lady Applebourne can fairly be asked to interpret Mr. Curtis's motives."

The Chairman began to say, "Perhaps—" but Jeffreys said:

"If I may be allowed to say so, sir, Lady Applebourne was receiving an honorarium for her services that evening. She might be expected to know what Mr. Curtis hoped to receive for that consideration. . . . Be that as it may, will you now tell us exactly what happened when Mr. Erskine arrived with you at your flat?"

Lady Applebourne again looked up at the Chairman, and said, "Must I answer that question?"

"I have to put it, sir," Jeffreys said hurriedly, "because it has reference to the deportment of my client on the evening in question."

"Very well," said Lady Applebourne decisively before the Chairman could reply. "You want to know, and I'll tell you."

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Her mouth drew itself back at each end in a smile without laughter.

"Mr. Erskine said he wanted a drink. I told him to go home. He began to be—how can I put it . . . ?"

"Importunate?" the Chairman suggested.

"That's it—importunate, aggressive. He followed me into the hall, and I pressed the button for the lift. He kept saying, 'What about another drink? What about another drink?' and I kept telling him to go home."

"And then?" Jeffreys asked gently.

"He came into the lift with me, and tried to kiss me."

"I see."

"I told him not to make a fool of himself, and pushed him out. I didn't want to have any trouble with him."

"Was anyone else present?"

"No. No one heard. We spoke very quietly. It was late, and we didn't want to wake anyone."

"Not even the night porter?"

"He wasn't there."

"Mr. Chairman," said Jeffreys, walking across to the table and producing a pile of photostats from a brief-case, "I have here some copies of affidavits sworn three days ago in the presence of the Consul General by Mr. George Smith, doorman. Could they be distributed?"

The Clerk of the Committee took them from him, and handed them to the members.

"You will see," said Jeffreys, "that Mr. Smith in his deposition is categorical." He began to read. "I was in the office at 3.25 A.M. on Friday, May 11th. Lady Applebourne came into the hall with a fellow she called Michael, and I woke up. Lady Applebourne has a lot of gentleman friends, and I wasn't surprised. She said, 'You care for me to fix you a drink, Michael?' and he said, 'No, baby. It's late.' She said, loving-like, 'Come on,' and he said, 'No, it's late.' So she got in the elevator and slammed the gate and called him a god-damned bastard and some other names I wouldn't care to remember. She was high, alright. Signed George Smith."

"Do you know Mr. Smith?"

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"It's horrible," said Lady Applebourne, as if to herself. "Horrible, horrible, horrible!" Then, raising her voice, "How dare you say such things? The porter! The negro night-porter. How could you repeat these vile things? How could you?"

She leaned forward and covered her face with her gloved hands, her shoulders feminine and pulsating with sobs. The Clerk of the Committee offered her a glass of water, but she pushed his hand away.

"No, thank you," she said, raising her face decisively. And to the Chairman, "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry. But it's so sordid hearing that one's been spied on—by a porter whom everyone—everyone in the building—knows is a liar and a thief."

"I think the Committee will form its own assessment of the document—from its tone and language," the Chairman said. "I take it, Mr. Jeffreys, that Mr. Smith purports to give a verbatim account of Mr. Erskine's conversation with Lady Applebourne?"

"An accurate account of the proceedings, I would say, sir."

The Chairman read aloud from the affidavit. "She said, 'You care for me to fix you a drink,' and he said, 'No, baby. It's late.'"

"He seems to have entered into the idiom quickly," Carter-Budd said across the table to the Attorney, who smiled.

"Mr. Erskine, according to Mr. Smith, used those words?" asked the Chairman. "They seem implausible."

"They are, sir, quite obviously a paraphrase of his language—a true reproduction of Mr. Erskine's sentiments expressed in Mr. Smith's own terms," said Jeffreys.

"That isn't stated. All I see here is an affidavit purporting to quote direct speech. It's a most unsatisfactory document. The Committee will attach to it the value it merits."

"Thank you," said Lady Applebourne meekly.

"With respect, sir," said Jeffreys. "I have put forward this affidavit in order that the evidence of one unbiased observer might be considered. It has been suggested that

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Mr. Erskine was no longer sober when he took Lady Applebourne to her home, and that after a series of indiscretions at the tables he was only restrained from a consummate indiscretion by Lady Applebourne's reluctance. My own submission——"

"Perhaps you will leave that point till you address the Committee later," the Chairman said coldly. "I am anxious to conclude the evidence this afternoon."

"I have only two further questions to ask you, Lady Applebourne," said Jeffreys, and waited while she looked at him, her fingers moving back and forth on her handbag.

"Is not the truth the exact opposite of what you have stated about the end of your party? Was it, in fact, you—not Mr. Erskine—who proposed that you go up together to your flat, and was it not he, not you, who refused to do so? Are you not at this stage confessing your disappointment with your 'virtue?'"

"That's absurd," she said abruptly.

Jeffreys paused, and examined his papers.

"And now a last question. Are you aware . . . did you know that Mr. Curtis"—he spoke reluctantly—"was indicted yesterday in Washington by a Grand Jury for perjury in connection with his evidence before the Senate Improper Influences Investigating Committee? Did you know that?"

"No," said Lady Applebourne faintly.

"That is a matter of some personal interest," said the Chairman. "But while Mr. Curtis's case is *sub judice*, it would not be proper for us to take note of it. Indeed," he went on, turning to Jeffreys with a frown, "I regret that some of the questions put to Lady Applebourne have gone even beyond the wide limits of tolerance which the Committee has set itself."

"Just one question, Mr. Chairman," said Thompson. "I had the impression from Lady Applebourne's earlier evidence that she and Mr. Erskine——"

"I'm sorry," said the Chairman, "I can't allow that question."

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"Well, must it be left in doubt?"

"It is no concern of the Committee."

"In that case," Jeffreys interrupted, "may I say on behalf of my client—in order to avoid any misunderstanding—that he has never had any improper association of any kind with Lady Applebourne."

He looked at her for confirmation, and the members of the Committee waited too. Instead, she returned the glance insolently and without speaking, before asking the Chairman, "Is that all?"

"Yes," he said. "Thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence. The Committee is most appreciative." A murmur of assent arose from round him.

"It has been a pleasure," said Lady Applebourne.

Outside the door, Spencer was waiting for her in the corridor.

"How was it?" he asked, hurrying beside her as she walked briskly to the head of the stairs.

"Just foul!" she said.

"What happened?"

"I'm four drinks behind."

"Well, what happened?" Spencer asked angrily. Lady Applebourne paused by a marble bust of Palmerston and said:

"Listen, little boy! I've got a headache and I don't feel like being rushed." Her voice drawled. "If you're feeling lively, go and jump in the Thames."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Return from Cwmbrau

FROM THE SQUARE outside the hotel the sound of singing bloomed, and then faded when Vaughan pulled down the heavy sash. The miners who had carried him over a mile on their shoulders from the large Congregational Hall all the way through the main streets of Cwmbrau, past the Committee Rooms of their opponents, where they had halted for brief abuse, to his very door, were reluctant to go home although it was already late, the buses had stopped running, and only a train's whistle or the clatter of shunting in the valley accompanied the singers in the deep silence.

Vaughan was happy. For the first few days he had been pushed from one meeting to another by Davies, his agent, introduced to leading members of the Miners' Lodges, and taken for long walks with a claue of canvassers over the curves of packed, "back-to-back houses, where he was welcomed, surprisingly to himself, by his own portrait grinning back at him from almost every window; and, in the afternoons, by miners' wives who brought him cups of hot, dark tea that he had to drink as an act of ceremonial courtesy, whether he liked it or not.

Walking alongside his agent's car, accompanied by the bullying demand from the loudspeaker to "Vote for Vaughan, Peace and Independence"—an instruction that brought faces to every window and door—Vaughan soon found himself agreeably involved in a multitude of new intimacies. Everyone called him "Johnny." The old miners, squatting and coughing in the sunlight on their porches, would stop him and say, "I knew your Dad. We went to classes together," or would clasp his hand and detain him while they told him an anecdote of Gfrait and Cwmbrau.

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He had little need for active campaigning. On the platform he was normally a diffident and inadequate speaker. But in Cwmbrau, though in all appearance he seemed a stranger, tall and stooping among the square, upright miners, tweed-jacketed among the blue-suited men with their caps and white mufflers, he felt an avivistic ease that brought him together with them in comfortable conversation. They loved him on trust. He was "Geraint's boy." The power of his father's name that had brought great glory to Cwmbrau had passed, as if by a laying-on of hands, to his son. Even the children, his faithful attendants, who followed him in squads sucking lollipops and picking noses, watched him with awe when he began to speak from the car.

Once he had become accustomed to the daily routine of canvass and meeting, Vaughan became stimulated by the enthusiasm of his supporters. No sooner did he arrive at a Working Men's Club under the guidance of Davies, who seemed to know every elector by name, than he was greeted with a handshake all round, and countless offers of drinks. He had no need of speech. All that was necessary was that he should stand with a glass of beer in his hand, a smile of general approval on his face, and listen contentedly to the assurances of his supporters.

"You're in," they would say. "The other lot? They'll get a few up there"—a wave towards Cyn Garth, where the managers and shopkeepers lived—"but down here, man, we're solid."

Davies wasn't so optimistic. "You're not in till the votes are counted," he told Vaughan when he left him at the hotel entrance. "I've been in elections with great mass meetings—pulled the roof down—like Morgan's on Tuesday. And then—when the day comes—the quiet ones come out. The one's who don't go to meetings. And you add them up, and they've won."

"Yes," said Vaughan thoughtfully.

He sat in his arm-chair listening to the grave chorus of Cwm Rhondda, muted thought it was by the closed window, rising like a consecration into the night. He felt with it a

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desire to triumph in the election so that he might dedicate his life from now on to those who had given him their affection and faith, and had reposed in him their hopes. And Helen too. The separation from her was like home-sickness, a minute-by-minute ache, whether in the streets or on the platform, before his audience or in his bedroom. Cwmbrau was no place for her, they had agreed, and he had left her in London. But each night she had telephoned to him, asking him the details of his day, advising him and reassuring him. That very evening she had spoken to him, and like a boy he had listened to her order to go to bed early, nodded into the telephone and sent her a kiss across their separation of over a hundred and fifty miles. He wanted to win so that he might go back in pride to be cherished, and rewarded with the security of her approval.

The return to Cwmbrau had softened his old resentments. He thought now of his father not with the bitterness of a neglected and ill-treated son, but with the tolerance of a descendant for the harsher and old-fashioned standards of the dead age of his ancestors. When he heard his father's name wistfully spoken by gentle old women the habit of fear disappeared, and instead he remembered his father with a tender regret. And he remembered Miss Miller. Miss Miller, the housekeeper. But that was private. Very private. Perhaps she was still alive. She had only been about fifteen years older than himself when he lived at Pelling with his father. The leaves stirring at the window in the summer night, the sheltering darkness of her arms in his boyhood. It was a memory that had become his adolescent and adult fantasy, compelling but abortive, till Helen—only Helen of all the women he'd ever known—had given it a new reality.

He began to write her a letter, the nightly letter that he had written ever since he had been in Cwmbrau.

Helen, darling. I've started to count the days to the end. Only seven more, or is it eight? No, it's only twenty to twelve. Nothing much happened today. The canvass is going well, and I think we ought to win. Your Message to the Women of

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Cwmbrau has been a great success. They loved it, and want to see you. Could you face coming down for the count? I know it will be hard for Celia to alter her travel arrangements, and I don't want you to go by air all alone, but couldn't you perhaps go two days later? I don't want you to go to any trouble, darling, but if we win, it would be fun to celebrate, and if I lose—well, I miss you so much.

I've got an enormous yellow brass bed that leers at me every night. I simply can't face it alone till I'm anæsthetised with mild-and-bitter. When am I going to see you again? In a way Cwmbrau might be a town on a mountain of the moon, for all the news we get here of London. It's all terribly distorted, despite the B.B.C. and the London papers.

There's a rumour here that Jane Erskine's divorcing Michael because of some American woman who gave evidence. Anything in it?

Morgan put on a tremendous performance last night. Very up-stage and high-minded when somebody asked him about Erskine. "We are fighting this election on principles, not on personalities." You know the sort of thing. He was an enormous success.

The Americans, incidentally, have put Cwmbrau off limits. That means I am spared the embarrassing fights of the first few days. At Llantaevy on Saturday there was a broken jaw and a fractured leg—a G.I. and a miner. Ah! that's a bore, and doesn't help us. Incidentally, you remember those two girls who started the riot last week? They're tarts, both of them. They'd been convicted several times of soliciting in Paddington, and been packed off home. It's rather dampened the ardour of all but the extremists, who think a good local tart is better than the best imported G.I. . . .

The room had become stuffy, and he threw open the window. From the street below came shouts of "'Night, Johnny! 'Night, lad!" and good-nights from the miners to each other, the occasional shrill of a girl's laughter, and, at last, the dwindling footfalls and diminishing sound of singing, as Vaughan's supporters made their way home. He didn't want to sleep. The meeting at the Congregational Hall had become an ardent service, burning with zeal and devotion, in which the whole audience, from the opening hymn to the

Chairman's concluding words, "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" had taken part as if they were dedicating themselves in divine worship. Even at the end of the speeches, during the collection, the pound notes and silver had been sent up to the platform with the eagerness of those who make offerings.

Vaughan could still see the faces shining with sweat even through the haze of smoke, and hear the coughing and the singing and the clapping and the calling and the stamping and the whistling of the great audience, that took every hesitation in his speech as an occasion for a cheer, and every mention of the family name as an excuse for applause that made the wooden floor thud. He had only mentioned Erskine twice. But each time he had been so astonished by the reaction of his listeners that he had momentarily forgotten the trend of his argument. When he referred to Broughton or Baileister there was laughter, hostile and good-natured. They were political enemies whom the miners saw as political caricatures. But Erskine was different. When Vaughan spoke his name it was as if a cold wash of hatred swept the audience into a grim, attentive silence. Erskine was not merely a political enemy. He had been popular. For his sake they had been ready to forgive the Government for much. The Anglo-American Agreement had angered them, and they had resisted it. But since the Select Committee had begun to sit, and its proceedings, though still confidential, had been whispered in report, the Agreement had become in their eyes an outrage, a contract to their injury made in dishonour, and Erskine's pleas in its favour now seemed shameless, traitorous and contemptible. Not only had he betrayed them. He had betrayed the nation's self-respect.

When Vaughan remembered the sudden merciless silence that followed his mention of Erskine's name he felt exultation and relief. For years Erskine had stood, patronising and aloof, between him and Helen. Not that he had ever discovered anything in their relationship that he could condemn. What he resented was the slow smile that he had once or twice intercepted between Helen and Erskine, the confident

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way in which he touched her hand, or put his arm round her shoulder, an indefinable suggestion of understanding between the two of them that intruded into his own association with his wife. And Erskine's regular inquiry in front of Helen, "Well, what are you doing now, John?" The casual question was an insult, humbling him in his wife's eyes. That was now over. Never again would Erskine address him with effrontery. Vaughan drew himself up, cast a glance over the Election Addresses, and scattered correspondence on the table, and smiled to himself in the looking-glass. His appearance displeased him, and his smile drooped away.

One by one, he slit open the envelopes. They contained questionnaires from various societies, invitations to address meetings, angry complaints about the use of loud-speakers after seven o'clock. One large, square envelope was marked "Urgent." Vaughan opened it and read:

"The Temple of Persephone
Heard a lover's euphony.
Michael Erskine? Tony Spencer?
Was it Helen? (Signed),
The Censor."

He read it again incomprehendingly, his eye following the elaborate calligraphy with its curls and foils, rather than the sense of the doggerel. He took up the envelope and examined the postmark. The letter had come from London, W.2. After a few moments Vaughan realised that he was holding in his hand an anonymous letter about Helen. He put it down again and walked over to the looking-glass, his legs moving with difficulty as though they had become bloodless and the sinews atrophied by the darkness in his mind. He regarded his white face and said loudly, "It's you -- it's about you."

Then he returned to his chair and sat for half an hour, holding the letter in his hand. Erskine! Yes, Erskine. That's what he'd always thought. Erskine. It had happened at Huberton. The Temple of Persephone. But Spencer! That was impossible. Absurd. Helen had scarcely spoken half a

dozen sentences to him in her life. It was absurd. Spencer. He was the sort of person who'd be glad to get an invitation to dinner. Nothing else. Helen and Spencer. It was ridiculous. The two didn't rhyme. Spencer. Censor. Who the devil would want to harm him? At such a moment too. When everything was going so well. Helen had telephoned him that very evening. She'd been gentle and solicitous. "Michael Erskine? Tony Spencer? Was it Helen? Signed, 'The Censor.'" The jingle was taking hold of his mind. Vaughan walked up and down the room. Spencer. That crawling rat. It was impossible. He'd been hanging around Helen at Huberton. The Temple of Persephone. By the lake. He was good-looking. Always hanging about. In the Lobbies, on the Terrace, at Huberton. No. Not Spencer. Vaughan laughed. Helen was far too much of a snob. She wouldn't go for some second-rate journalist. Erskine was more in her line. But Helen had hardly been out of his sight. And Erskine had his own troubles.

Vaughan packed his razor and toothbrush in a small bag and went downstairs. In the dining-room a single light was burning, and his opponent, Wynne, eating a cold supper of chicken and salad, greeted him as he passed through to the main door.

"How's it going, John?"

"All right," said Vaughan.

"Like a drink?"

"No thanks, I'm going out."

"Doing a meeting at this time of night? Not fair, old chap."

"I'm going for a drive." Vaughan paused and said, "How're you getting on?"

Wynne fitted a cigarette into his holder. "Pretty well. Only got shouted down twice today. Still, let's not get political. Change your mind and have a drink."

Vaughan drank a whisky-and-soda, and hurried off to his car, parked in front of the hotel.

By the time Vaughan reached Gloucester, the quatrain had become the ineluctable accompaniment of his thoughts,

a monotonous bass to his anxieties. He had gone through the register of his friends and acquaintances, seeking to identify the anonymous letter writer, but he could think of no one with certainty whom he could have named as the author of the verse, which had translated him so abruptly from security to torment. He wasn't even sure if the handwriting with its graceful embellishments was that of a man or a woman. One thing he was certain of—the writer wanted to destroy his mental peace at a critical moment of the campaign. For that certainty Vaughan was grateful. It helped him with the assurance which he achieved near Witney that the likelihood of the innuendoes being true was much diminished by the political malice of his anonymous enemy. But who could wish him such ill? Whom had he so grievously offended that he was ready to murder his tranquillity?

As he drove through High Wycombe, strained from his three and a half hour journey, Vaughan was beginning to regret his impulse to return at the taunt of some obscene and nameless scribbler. His regret turned to self-reproach when he reached Wilton Place, and the desolate road, lamplit and silent, where only an occasional figure still moved with the appearance of mysterious and clandestine business, made him feel that to be out of bed at that hour was improper and dissolute. He put the gears into neutral, so that the car ran with pneumatic noiselessness, gently bouncing, for the last hundred yards to the entrance of the flats. His butler, Charlesworth, was on holiday, and Helen had sent the maid away for three days to look after her sick uncle. Vaughan was glad of that. It meant that the servants wouldn't look at him with either the impertinent curiosity or the abnormal tact which they reserved, as their discretion, for the periods of his quarrels and reconciliations with Helen. Nor did he want to disturb Helen. He was now exhausted from the arduous day of canvassing and meetings, followed by a grotesque journey more than half-way across Wales and England. He left the car outside the entrance, and climbed slowly to his flat on the fourth floor, his weariness attended by shame.

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The bedroom door opened with a hush as he pushed it cautiously over the thick carpet. He had no need to switch on the light. Through the half-drawn curtains two long panels of light thrown up from the street lamps below, and separated from each other by a fillet of shadow, stretched across the room. One fell on his empty bed, with the coverings neatly turned back as if awaiting him, and touched Helen's sleeping face. The other reflected a pattern of leaves on the sycamore wardrobe. Vaughan smiled, and sitting on a chair began to untie his shoe laces. Helen was sleeping on the verge of the bed, with her arms folded across her breast, her mouth open, breathing deeply and regularly. Behind her in the shadow, she seemed to have placed two bolsters.

She gave a broken sigh in her sleep, and Vaughan paused, holding his left shoe. But as he looked towards the bed the bolsters heaved, his wife murmured, and in a stirring of the curtain the light spread round her and over the figure at her side. Vaughan stared at the bed with an agony possessing his forearms and thighs. This was the nightmare he had lived through and rejected for all the years of his married life. And now that it had become reality he was powerless and bewildered as in a dream. The trembling wouldn't stop, and he sat in the chair unable to raise himself and end the horror. At last he heard a mumble, saw the mass turn and subside, and was released from his paralysis.

Still wearing one shoe, he hobbled quietly over to the bed and looked down at the sleeping couple. Till that moment he hadn't thought who the man might be. All that he could see was a dark head pressed against Helen's cheek. Delicately, as if he still had a lingering wish not to disturb his wife, he drew back the sheet from the man's face, looked and covered him again. The thought occurred to him that he had never before seen Spencer without a collar.

What Vaughan couldn't understand was why he felt no anger. On the contrary, he felt relief that he had won certainty, and that the anonymous letter had now lost its poison. He felt no hatred for Helen. Sleeping with her relaxed, childlike expression, she had an air of happiness

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that he had always wished to see in her. What he disliked was the unseemliness of the situation. He couldn't stand there all night. And what the devil was Spencer doing in his bedroom anyhow? Although the air was warm, Vaughan's teeth had begun a soft chatter in time with the feverish trembling of his arms and legs. He couldn't stay and watch indefinitely. He had to do something.

Between his bed and Helen's was a small built-in table with a telephone, two or three books and a water-bottle. Vaughan looked again at the intimacy of the sleeping faces, and picked up the bottle. The glass that covered its mouth tinkled, and Vaughan laid it quietly at the side of the telephone. Then he poured the water over their heads.

At the first lisp of the water Spencer grunted, and Helen flounced in her sleep. Within a few seconds it had gurgled and splashed on to their faces, the pillows and the sheets, and Spencer shouted "A-a-a-h!" thrashing with his arms in the shock of the cold water. Helen woke with gasping, stifled screams. "Oh, Tony, Tony! What is it? What is it?" her heart pounding with the panic of her waking.

"Oh," she screamed louder. "Quick! Quick! There's someone in the room. There's a man in the room."

Vaughan didn't move. Spencer near the wardrobe was desperately trying to dress. Helen, sobbing with terror, had covered herself in the sheet.

"Well," said Vaughan at length. He switched on the main light of the bedroom, and mournfully examined the crumpled bed, the back of Helen's drenched head as she hid her face in the pillow, and Spencer, barefooted, in his shirt and trousers on the other side of the bed, who stared back at him insolently and said, "Well?"

"Get out!" said Vaughan.

Helen slowly turned her face from the bed and said to him, "You beast! You vile, disgusting beast!" She raised herself on her arm, and pulled her sodden nightdress on to her shoulder. "How dare you come spying on me! How dare you!"

Her voice had become sharp with fury, her terror all gone.

She threw the coverings from her, and approached Vaughan with her hands raised.

"How could you do such a thing."

Vaughan looked from her to Spencer, who was standing sullenly with his hands in his pockets. He was still trembling, and he was unfamiliar with the voice that answered her.

"How dare I do such a thing! I!" Vaughan called the room to witness. "She wants to know how I dare . . ."

"Yes, you—you . . ." She ran at him, beating his chest with her fists. "Get out!" she screamed at him. "Get out."

He retreated from her step by step as she struck at his body and slapped at his face. She pushed him through the doorway, shut the door and locked it resolutely.

She came back to Spencer, and said humbly, "I'm terribly sorry, darling."

"I told you it wouldn't be any good," he said. "I'm sorry, darling. Let me get you a towel."

"No."

They sat on the bed and smoked together. From the other side of the door they could hear low whimpering sounds.

"Tell him to go away," said Spencer.

She went obediently to the door and said, "Go away, John. Please go away."

After a few minutes they heard his hobbling footsteps as he went down the stairs, and then the sound of his car as he started it and drove away.

"Well, that's it," said Spencer. He was lying back on the bed smoking, with Helen's head in the crook of his arm. "What d'you think he'll do?"

"I don't know."

"He can't do much with Cwmbrau only a week from now."

"Tony?"

"Yes."

"You promised me that if anything were to happen—anything serious—you'd come away with me."

"Well?"

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“Well, something has happened.”

He disengaged himself from her and said, “Don’t be too serious—prematurely.”

“Tony!”

“Yes.”

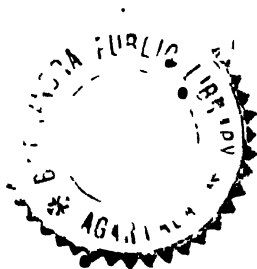
“You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you . . .”

“I’m not asking you to do anything.”

“But those few days we were going to spend in France. This won’t interfere with it? Will it? Will it?” she repeated insistently.

“No,” said Spencer. He took up his jacket from the chair. “At least I don’t think so.”

When he went to the dressing-table he walked carefully round Vaughan’s shoe that lay on its side in the middle of the room.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jane Finishes a Pullover

SEEN THROUGH THE bottom of a tumbler, dissociated and far off, the three men moved and talked, askew and familiar, dissolving and reforming like reflections in ruffled water. Jane, from her arm-chair, listened and knitted. In the dining-room Jeffreys was holding a ballon of Armagnac, cupped under its stem between the first and second fingers, and fondling it into warmth. His voice came to Jane, alone in the drawing-room, like morning sounds to one who, half-awake, struggles with the paralysis of sleep.

"The dates didn't match," he said, and Dangerfield murmured, and the voices blurred again into a cotton-wool confusion. She could see them through the open door, gravely assembled with their brandy glasses and Dangerfield's cigar, the inverted, diminishing mirage—far-off—seen through the base of a tumbler.

"As long as they don't speak to me . . ." she said to herself, and loosened a little the ball of fawn wool.

"The Prime Minister gave me a bat." The words went round in the groove. The metallised voice of the headline. "The Prime Minister gave me a bat." Directed by the repetitive voice, she went to the walnut writing-table, out of sight from the dining-room, and turning back the flap, groped under a pile of envelopes for the newspaper. There was a stir of chairs in the next room, and taking up the paper, she hurried through the door that led to the hall and the bedroom.

"The Prime Minister gave me a bat," she said loudly, as she sat at her dressing-table. Her face reflected itself in a triptych. Beneath her eyes were mauve folds. Her normally

smooth cheeks had sunken, leaving a sharp line of bone from her ear to nose. She stared at herself, and said, "Hello! Hello, you!" Absently, she raised a lock of hair that was drooping over her ears, and then brushed it away with the back of her hand. The faces that multiplied her gestures belonged to three inimical people: pale and dangerous. The room turned around her, gracefully careening, and she went and sat on the bed with a newspaper in her hand.

"They didn't match. . . " she heard Jeffreys' voice, surgical and indifferent, coming through doors and walls and space and water. For almost a fortnight, since the evidence before the Select Committee had ended, she seemed not to have slept; Erskine's unease had at last seeped into her, and become identified with her own emotions. Gradually, she had become certain of her guilt, that it was she who, by her inadequacy, had started a train of disaster for her husband, that for everything—Spencer's betrayal, the Prime Minister's displeasure and the charges in the Select Committee itself—she in some way was to blame. But Lady Applebourne. That was a complication, private and unbearable. The charges of corruption against her husband were, of course, absurd. Ridiculous. But Lady Applebourne—that was a maggot in the brain. It had begun its slow boring when Curtis had first mentioned her. Since Lady Applebourne had given evidence, it had made an endless, agonising tour through the membranes and ventricles, pausing sometimes by day, but waking at night in the warmth of her pillow to wriggle its blind white head. A white maggot.

Did they turn in pleasure together? Had her hair lain over his face, her knee on his, her hand intimately on his shoulder? Jane placed her head on her arms and closed her eyes, but she began to shudder, and rose to her feet.

"The Prime Minister gave me a bat. . . ." She read the headline, and looked at Robert's photograph. He was a handsome boy, she thought, smiling at her as he held the cricket bat which the Prime Minister had given him for his last birthday. She smiled back at him, and blew the paper a kiss.

"They're foul," she said aloud. "Foul. They don't mind who they hurt. Why do they want to bring you into it? I hate them all."

Her giddiness had disappeared, and she went to the looking-glass to tidy her hair. She did so hastily, powdered her face, and went back to the drawing-room.

"I'm finishing a pullover for Robert," she said to Dangerfield who heaved himself from an arm-chair to greet her.

"I congratulate you, Jane," he said. "I imagine that knitting a pullover's rather like writing an epic. Anyone can begin. It's seeing it through that counts."

"We ought to celebrate," said Jeffreys. "The end of the pullover and the end of the Committee."

"I began the pullover long before the Committee was dreamt of," said Jane. The room was beginning to swing again; and she sat down hastily. If only they would go! But it was ten to nine. They wouldn't go for at least another two hours. She began to finish the neck of the pullover.

"You must cheer Michael up," said Jeffreys authoritatively. "You mustn't let him mope, Jane."

"No," said Jane.

"He's been getting thinner, you know."

"Yes," said Jane. "He's been working so much."

"You're not exactly the Fat Lady yourself, if I may say so," said Dangerfield. "I watched you," he said in an uncle-ish voice. "You didn't eat a thing at dinner."

"I'll be all right when this is all over."

"You must get away," said Dangerfield. "Have a month or two off. Go to Brazil or somewhere."

"Why Brazil?" said Jeffreys.

"Rio," Dangerfield said.

"I can't stand looking at bays," said Jeffreys. "There's something so terribly banal about loops and curves. Bays should only be looked at—inwards. From the sea. What you need, Michael, is a calm strand—somewhere like Sitges . . . delightful place near Barcelona."

JANE FINISHES A PULLOVER

Erskine gave them each another Armagnac, and took one for himself.

"Let's get this over first," he said. "There'll be tons of time to think about holidays."

"Oh, no, Michael," said Jane, unpicking a row of stitches. "Let's think of holidays now. We've had so many awful things to think of lately."

"It's rather curious," said Erskine, "but in a way, I'd rather like to have a holiday in America."

"America?" Jane asked, laying her knitting aside. "Why America? It seems to me the very worst place for a holiday. I'd have thought we'd had enough—"

"Too tiring for me," Dangerfield put in quickly. "Too noisy for an old man."

"I like America," Erskine said, sipping his brandy. "It's lively and gay and exciting. There's something vital and dynamic about it. You feel it the moment you arrive. I'd always imagined New York as a grim, dreary place—a sort of jungle bounded by skyscrapers. It's nothing at all like that—nothing. The air itself is stimulating. You can't be there five minutes without feeling that you're a much brighter and livelier person than you were before."

"And better?" Jane asked.

Erskine glanced at her quickly, and continued, "I'd somehow thought of New York as being drab and colourless. Not a bit of it. Everything's colourful—the people, the taxis, the shops. Even the traffic seems to . . . somehow to bound forward with one gulp. Everyone's doing something and going somewhere. Everyone's neat, and all the women look pretty and well dressed."

"Idyllic," said Dangerfield. "But I can't say I recognise the picture. America's lively, but it's the liveliness of a nation with high blood-pressure. Its vivacity—well, that's the agitation of a neurosis. You're bounded by skyscrapers, it's true. It's a prison without bars. A democracy with cast-iron social distinctions, and the rigid code of a second-rate provincialism."

"Oh, come," said Erskine. "Really, Christopher. There

isn't a word of truth in that. You write off any code that isn't yours—any form of manners that you yourself haven't inherited or helped to form. How well do you know America?"

"Never been there in my life," said Dangerfield contentedly. "Jane, you are the best woman I've ever known. You allow me to blow my cigar smoke into your curtains, and never protest."

"It's because it makes you look so happy," she said. "You're my third favourite man." She held up the pullover for Dangerfield to see. "This is for my second favourite. Do you like it? It's finished."

"I think it's wonderful," said Dangerfield.

"Excellent," said Jeffreys.

"It's so hard to know what American women are really like," said Jane, as if she were replying to Erskine. "One sees them over here, and one sometimes forgets they're on holiday."

"They seem to me," said Dangerfield, "to be embalmed."

"You're not going to provoke me," said Erskine, examining his finger-nails. "I don't think you mean a word you say. Actually, American women—I would say—stay younger than any women anywhere."

"They're over-fussed by their husbands," said Dangerfield. "It's all the fault of the Pioneers and the pioneers. Too many men chasing too few women. Result? American women have an inflated sense of their own importance."

"Well, I like them," said Erskine.

"Do you?" Jane asked. "Do you?"

She began to laugh privately, a small internal laugh that went on longer than she wanted it to; and when she tried to arrest it, it laughed on of its own volition, on and on till her eyes, filled with the tears of her laughing, became tinged with an incipient panic, and Jeffreys and Dangerfield looked away.

"Janel!" Erskine said sharply, and she stopped.

"What right had he to speak to me like that?" she asked

herself. Lady Applebourne. She wasn't an American, but she was like one. Secure. Composed. One of the New York papers had printed a photograph of her and Michael taken at a cocktail party. His arm was hidden behind her back, and she was looking up at his face. Spencer's newspaper had reprinted it. When the reporter telephoned to ask whether Jane knew Lady Applebourne she said, "No, I don't know her." And the reporters said, "We gather she's a friend of your husband." That was humiliating.

Since Lady Applebourne had given her evidence, not a day had passed without the innuendo that Erskine had been her lover. The Committee's Report wasn't yet public, but the rumour was already widespread that Lady Applebourne herself had declared her relations with the Minister. No newspaper referred to the circumstance except by allusion. Then, in one paper, next to a photograph of Lady Applebourne was an article on Divorce and Politics. "Sir Charles Dilke," said the writer, "was the natural choice of the Liberal Party for the Gladstonian succession. His divorce in 1885 ensured that he never held Ministerial office. In 1889 Parnell was cited as a co-responder. The ethics of his time drove him from Parliament, and split his party. In our own day, the canon has been relaxed. Whether public opinion may again require that a statesman's private life should measure up to his public office and responsibilities is a question to which we may not need to wait long for an answer."

From the earliest morning till night, there were journalists and photographers waiting at the bottom of the lift and in the street to photograph and interrogate Jane and her husband as they left their flat. Erskine had wanted to protest to the Chairman of the Select Committee, but Jeffreys had dissuaded him. "It's a form of contempt," he said. "But you won't do yourself anything but harm by complaining. Never complain about the Press. They always have the last word."

"We gather she's a friend of your husband," Jane repeated to herself. Lady Applebourne. She'd asked Michael night after night to tell her about Lady Applebourne, and

he'd replied, "There's nothing to tell." And in the end, he'd become silent, awake in the darkness; she'd known by his breathing that he was awake, and she'd lain wakeful at his side because she wanted to be sure about the maggot, the agonising maggot, eating its slow way through her consciousness. She bent her head over he knitting as the three figures receded, drawing away beyond her reach into a middle distance from which their voices came like the sounds that reach the anæsthetised.

"The P.M.'s determined to have a day for it before Cwmbrau," said Jeffreys.

"Quixotic!" said Dangerfield.

"Oh, no," said Erskine. "He's right to have the Report and the debate before the election. But I'm glad we're not having the Committee Stage of the Anglo-American Agreement before we've got the Report out of the way. The Agreement's too important. I don't want to be sanctimonious, but it's much more important than my own private affairs. It would be absolute madness for the House to reject the Agreement just because it may decide it doesn't like me."

"It won't," said Jeffreys. "I'm certain it won't. I think Lady Applebourne cooked her own goose. The woman's so obviously a fraud and a liar. After all, the whole case against you has depended on the evidence of a reckless journalist, a shady lobbyist and a near-tart. I don't see how they can possibly censure you."

"Lady Applebourne," said Jane, looking up, "is very pretty."

"Not really," said Dangerfield. "It's the standardised cast. Didn't you think there was something rather unnatural about her nose? As if it had been reconstructed? I'm told they've started giving girls new noses as twenty-first birthday presents. Didn't you think, Jeffreys, she looked as though she'd had a plastic operation?"

"No idea," said Jeffreys. "She doesn't let me get near enough." He laughed a buffeting, eupeptic laugh. "You'd better ask Michael."

'There was a moment of uncertainty.

"I'm sorry," said Jane, rising to her feet. "I regard that remark as being in the worst possible taste. Perhaps I may be excused." She gathered up her knitting, and opened the door.

Jeffreys followed her, apologising and confused, but she hurried out without turning her head.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Michael," said Jeffreys. "It was idiotic of me. One of those verbal things that slip out precisely because one doesn't want to say them. I hope I haven't upset Jane."

"You have," said Dangerfield, angry at Jeffreys' indiscretion. "You couldn't have said anything more hurtful."

"I'm an absolute fathead," said Jeffreys. "I'm terribly sorry, Michael. I'll go."

"No, don't go," said Erskine, walking across the room to press a bell. "Let's have a whisky. Jane's exhausted, poor darling. Exhausted and overwrought." He stroked back his hair.

"The Applebourne thing's become fixed hard in her mind. She can't bear anyone talking about it."

"No one's taking it seriously," said Jeffreys.

"No one except the Press," said Erskine. "They've lost interest in corruption. All they're concerned about is what I did with Lady Applebourne, and whether Jane's going to divorce me."

"Just a small one," said Jeffreys, as Erskine poured out the whisky which the maid had brought into the room.

"Mind you," said Dangerfield, stretching out his hand for his own glass, "I think Cavalaire's one of the nicest smaller places in the South of France. When we were children, Hyères used to be the place—croquet, colonels and nannies. Cavalaire was a remote little *plage* in those days. . . . I suppose it's altered a lot."

"They've built a new hotel," said Jeffreys. "We were there two years ago."

Having changed the subject, Dangerfield lay back in his arm-chair while Jeffreys gave them his reminiscences of

WHO GOES HOME

motoring and sailing holidays, dreary, repetitious, self-satisfied recollections, a droning background to the present and welling pleasure that rose with the whisky.

When Jane left the three men she went first to the nursery where the baby was sleeping in the crevasse of the half-drawn curtains. She had gone to see Sarah as a comfort, but as she looked at her closed eyes and rapt indifference, she again felt alone, except for the conversations in her mind. The child became impersonal, an unrelated object. Yet when a curtain fluttered in the late evening wind, Jane went to exclude the draught from her face. For a few moments she held the chintz in her hand while the pattern of forget-me-nots enlarged itself, blossoming in her vision and filling all her mind till she shook her head and the room retreated into perspective. Then, with both hands, she flicked the curtains apart on to the view of the bombed mansions across the road, the flats with their scabrous plaster, buttresses and scaffolding.

Perched on top of a builder's ladder, leading from a deserted balcony to a flower-bolled ledge, was a man with a camera, aiming it directly at her face. She saw the flash, the grotesque motion with which, clutching his apparatus, he raised his hat, and the movement of his lips.

"I don't think this is happening," she said to herself, and walked slowly to her bedroom, leaving the door open and the curtains slapping in the wind that blew through the nursery.

In her bedroom, she sat on the bed for twenty minutes, listening to the murmur from the drawing-room. With her attuned ear, she could hear Michael's voice, light and cheerful, followed by interruptions of sudden laughter. She wanted him to come and explain to her about Lady Apple-bourne. That was all that mattered. If only she could straighten that between them—the rest would then be easy. She visualised the maggot stirring its white head and began to cry into her pillow. She was so exhausted. She wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

JANE FINISHES A PULLOVER

Still weeping, she went to the bedroom door and turned the key and pressed the bolt. She was sure he'd be sorry. And he'd know how much she loved him. Perhaps he'd get married again. But he wouldn't. He'd be sorry and never forgive himself because it was all his fault. He'd humiliated her in front of the whole world. She'd never forgive him although she loved him. Yet she was to blame too. Her guilt was profound and of a misery beyond thought. Great shapes were rolling in strange pneumatic masses through her head, and her arms and legs felt as though they had swollen into an elephantine size. She would sleep and sink into a tranquil darkness.

White with little green bands. They were pretty. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and more. The tablets were harder and harder to swallow and the water oozed over her lips.

When Erskine, an hour later, roused the door looked he rattled the handle, and called, "Jane." There was no reply, and he waited and listened. From inside the room came a faint, ugly snoring. He called "Jane" again, but still there was no reply.

"She's insufferable," he said to himself. And then with a pang of tenderness. "But a darling. I wish she wouldn't get these fantastic obsessions."

He rattled the handle once more, gave the door an angry glance and went to the guest room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Decision of the House

"MR. ROSSLEY," the Speaker called.

"Question Forty-nine, sir," said Rossley, half standing.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health went to the despatch box and scrabbled through the statistics of typhoid in England and Wales during the last five years.

"In" thanking the honourable Gentleman for his reply . . ." Rossley began, but the rest of his supplementary question was overwhelmed by the talk on both sides of the Chamber, rising in cumulative indifference to the progress of the questions.

"Order! Order!" the Speaker called emphatically, and decorously a few Members repeated "Order!" The conversation on the crowded benches died for a few moments, while the Parliamentary Secretary, with an air of apology for detaining the House, became audible. But when Erskine entered the Chamber through the door leading from the Aye Lobby, and took his seat in the corner of the third bench below the gangway, the voices rose again, tentatively at first, then insistently, as the Members discovered him in his unfamiliar place. With Dangerfield at his side, Erskine sat holding a single sheet of typed paper, and looking straight ahead.

For days the weather had become steadily hotter, and the scattered Members in light tropical and flannel suits gave the Chamber an unnatural appearance of holiday. Erskine, by contrast, wore a dark worsted suit with a black tie. Around him, his neighbours were silent and ill-at-ease,

THE DECISION OF THE HOUSE

sitting stiffly in order to establish considerateness, their conventional attitudes of behaviour disarrayed by the novel proximity. The spectators in the galleries were less restrained. They leaned forward, the women aflower in their summer dresses, to peep down at Erskine, nudging each other and pointing, so that the rising rows in the public gallery undulated and quivered till the attendants stilled them. The clock hands opposite the Speaker pointed to twenty-nine minutes past three.

"Mr. Gulliver," he called.

"Question Fifty," Gulliver said, rising.

The Parliamentary Secretary said, "No, sir," and the conversation became a roar as the hour of questions ended.

The Speaker stood, solemn and judicial, and said in a loud voice, amplified through the microphone above the clamour, "Order! Order!" The Chamber fell into an abrupt silence, broken for a few seconds by late arrivals at the back of the crowding Members who stood beyond the Bar next to the Sergeant-at-Arms. They were hushed by those near them, and the Speaker said, almost under his breath, "Prime Minister!"

The Prime Minister pushed himself from his place, and propping his arms on the despatch box said, "Sir." He paused and munched. "Sir, I beg to move"—munch—"that the Report which upon the twenty-first day of June was made from the Select Committee on the Conduct of a Member be now considered." With his left hand he felt his way backwards to the bench, and took his seat.

"Mr. Erskine," said the Speaker.

Erskine rose in his place, uncertain, after his many years of laying his notes on the despatch box, as to where he should put the typescript that was trembling in his hands.

"Mr. Speaker, sir," he began.

Beneath him, as the floor of the House sank into a chasm, he could see a head, bald except for a straggle of long, isolated hairs, and he wanted to use it as a rest for his papers. Beyond it were the dark faces, waiting in

curiosity and pleasure for his speech. He put his hands, together with the typescript, behind his back, so that their shaking might not be seen.

"Sir!" he repeated. "It is not my purpose today to repeat the arguments which I placed before the Committee, or to seek to rebut the Report. That is a matter for the judgment of the House, and I will not add to the evidence I have already offered, and by which I am content to be judged. The Committee heard me with fairness and courtesy, and for that I am in its debt, as I am in the debt of the House as a whole, which gave me the opportunity of exculpation from the most evil of the slanders directed against me."

Erskine had begun to address the House in an undertone, but now his voice was stronger.

"Before I speak of my personal feelings in this matter," he went on, "I must say something of the secondary and more public consequences of the emotions this matter has aroused. The Government, despite any harm to itself which the inquiry might cause, invited a public probing of my part in the Anglo-American Agreement. Its merits, of course, stand outside myself. Yet it must be acknowledged that the result of the inquiry has been to stimulate—and this can be heard on buses, in public houses and in clubs—an unworthy type of anti-Americanism, and a derivative attack on the Agreement and the Government."

"Sir," he said, turning to the Speaker, "this is a personal statement, and I won't dwell on the point. I wish only to say that the Report is specific that as far as the principals and agents of the Agreement were concerned, there was nothing improper, nothing corrupt, in their transactions. And if the central figure initiating and developing that slander was an American, I can only say that this was fortuitous—an irrelevancy. I do not doubt that his part in this matter will be proved as offensive in the United States as it has been proved here in Britain."

A sound of assent came from round him, interrupting the quiet, and Erskine continued, looking up to the panelling on the wall, "The origin of this inquiry lay, in the main, in

THE DECISION OF THE HOUSE

the charge that I had received money to further the Agreement. That has been proved false, depending as it did on the word of one who had the malice to make the charge, but lacked the courage to sustain it. Yet in the course of the inquiry it has been alleged, and the Committee has upheld the allegation, that on the single evening when I played roulette and borrowed money from Mr. Curtis—a man who is now being dealt with by the processes of American law—I was guilty of dishonourable conduct. I reject that description. There are times when through enthusiasm or indifference a man may engage in actions without ill-will or ill-intention, which, in retrospect, may at best be rash, and at worst a crime."

He gazed round him at the faces on the crowded benches, and from them to the Diplomatic Gallery where he saw de Saucigny and Hargreaves, side by side, leaning attentively over the rail. Then he turned his head towards the Gallery where Jane used to sit, and his eyes filled with tears. He began to say "Those who have seen me . . ." but he stopped at the word "seen," his nose and throat congested. He started again.

"Those who have seen me—those who have known me—will be able to estimate the degree of my fault. And yet I would be wrong, not only to myself but to my fellow Members as well, if I were silent about some of the circumstances of this affair. A Member of Parliament is an exposed person. He gives access to everyone. He is assailed from all sides with requests. He is constantly flattered and urged. It is harder and harder," Erskine went on firmly, "for a Member of Parliament to assess the multitudinous requests that come to him, and it is even harder for a Member once attacked by a determined perjurer, to disengage himself and prove his character unblemished.

"I will not deal with the other rumours and slanders which have been directed against me. Their nature—and their consequences—are well known. All that I can say, here, before my fellow Members, with all the solemnity that at this moment I feel—I can only say that the imputations

against me in connection with Lady Applebourne are false—utterly and completely false—utterly and completely without foundation.

"I leave myself to the judgment of the House. It would be a lie if I were to bend my head and acknowledge as truth the verdict of the Committee that my conduct has dishonoured the House." He spoke defiantly, with his head erect, defending himself with vigour. "I have not come to ask for mercy. I do not even ask for compassion. I only ask for the justice which has been enshrined in the proceedings of the House for hundreds of years, and which, I believe, will not be absent from its decisions today. There is no more for me to say. I now propose, Mr. Speaker, in accordance with the tradition of the House, to withdraw from the Chamber."

Erskine bowed to the Speaker, walked quickly down the three steps, erect and without looking to right or left, across the floor of the Chamber to the Bar of the House, bowed again and was gone. From both sides of the House came an "Ah!" a sigh, as if in the silence Members had been holding their breath and now, at last, released it.

"It's like a public execution," said Martindale to Morgan. "Everyone's here to be harrowed and enjoy it."

"Not everyone," said Morgan. "I've seen four like this since I've been in the House. I've hated every one of them. It's a terrible thing to be degraded in front of your friends."

In the surge of conversation that followed Erskine's withdrawal, the Speaker called, "Prime Minister," and the Prime Minister rose to move "That this House doth agree with the Report of the Committee."

The Prime Minister began in a matter-of-fact manner by complimenting the Committee on its excellent work. It had enjoyed the confidence of all Parties. The Chairman—the Prime Minister turned for an instant towards Sir Henry Wigmore, below the gangway, who inclined his head in acknowledgement—was highly respected, and had discharged an ungrateful task to the general satisfaction.

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The Prime Minister seemed reluctant to speak of Erskine. But suddenly, as if resolved, he placed his notes on the despatch box and, raising his voice, said, "For me, this is an occasion of peculiar melancholy. To attend the disgrace of one who has been eminent in the State and to witness his censure must always be an unhappy circumstance. But when, as in the case of the right honourable Gentleman the Member for Merchison, he is a colleague whose progress we all have observed at close hand, some of us with acclaim, others with hostility, yet none without admiration—then indeed our regrets are acute and personal."

"It is my own duty, and I undertake it willingly, although with a heavy heart, to urge the House to accept this report which condemns the conduct of the right honourable Gentleman. In this matter, honourable Members will not look to the Whips for guidance. The vote—for unless the House is of one mind there will be a division—the vote will be free."

The Prime Minister stared round him at the crammed benches, the heraldic shields on the walls and the Division Lobbies.

"The Whips will be our own consciences."

He straightened himself, and slapped his open palm on the despatch box.

"This is, in the deepest sense, a question of conscience. Had the right honourable Gentleman been convicted by the Committee of corrupt behaviour, there would not now be need of debate. No one would have sought to prolong judgment on a squalid crime. We would have passed to our sentence. But the right honourable Gentleman has been acquitted of that charge. It was the baseless slander of an individual, a Mr. Hendryk Curtis, a man of aliases, who is now facing the charge that he perjured himself before a United States Congressional Committee."

"Sir," he continued, taking his lapels in his hands, and turning to the Speaker, "the right honourable Gentleman is acquitted of crime. He is condemned for misdemeanour."

There was a grumble of approval from the Opposition Benches.

"What is the nature of that misconduct? There are no rules to which we can refer. If the right honourable Gentleman committed a breach of Treasury Regulations in borrowing dollars, there are some who would consider the transgression trivial, technical and venial, though neither the Chancellor nor I would include ourselves among them."

Broughton gave a faint smile.

"But though there are no rules," said the Prime Minister, "yet there is a code. When Ministers go abroad on their country's business the nation is entitled to expect that their behaviour should be seemly, their standards of the highest. The workman, studying with anxiety his daily paper, or listening to the wireless for news of Treaties and Contracts which affect his daily bread . . ."

"Reading the racing tips!" said a loud-voiced Government back-bencher. His heavy moustache raised itself above a baying mouth as he interrupted. The Chief Whip looked over his shoulder angrily, but the Prime Minister continued without pausing.

". . . must not feel that these vital matters are entrusted to men whose evenings are spent in gaming houses, in the society of people living on the fringe of the law, or hired to persuade, cajole and suborn, irrespective of the merits of the cause in which they exercise their talents."

A tumult of "Hear! Hear!" came from the Opposition.

"It is sometimes said," the Prime Minister went on, "that a man's private life should be judged separately from his public life. I am old-fashioned enough to take the opposite view. I express my own opinion. Others may think differently. I say only that those who speak for Britain must be men whose private conduct can bear the microscope of public scrutiny and emerge unblemished. By that examination my right honourable Friend has been judged to have failed.

"It is not for me, at this stage, to speak of punishment. It may be thought that there is punishment enough in being

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torn from the golden fruit of the highest office in the moment when the finger-tips touch it." He paused in his speech and waved towards the door. "Perhaps in the future, by other services, my right honourable Friend may once again labour up the arduous mountain, burdened though he must always be by the weight of this Report. We can in our day ill-afford to lose the talents—yes, and graces—with which he has served the State. But, distinguished though these have shown themselves to have been, and may show themselves again, it is the responsibility of this House to defend the standards which it has inherited from the countless generations that have gone before us.

"I well realise that if the House approves this Report, the right honourable Gentleman will be bound by honour, as well as by convenience, to decide whether he can remain of our company. It may indeed be that others will move for penalties more severe. However that may be, I submit this Motion to the House in the knowledge that great as may be its mercy, it will not shrink from delivering a judgment addressed to the merits of the matter. The honour of the House is today involved with the honour of the nation. Sir, I beg to move . . ."

He sat down amid a murmur of applause, slowly removed his glasses, and hunched his head into his shoulders. A number of Members rose to their feet, and the Speaker called, "Mr. Carrington."

"I'm glad I caught your eye, Mr. Speaker," said Carrington. He spoke with satisfaction. He had been proved right. "The small part I played in raising this matter . . . let us not try and smear with a charge of harshness those who condemn the right honourable Gentleman for his outrageous conduct; we should punish in a practical, sensible, fair-minded way, without malice. There is a point where forbearance undermines justice . . ."

In his mind as he spoke he identified himself with a crusader, a judge, a Jack Wilkes—the champion of a cause, the deputy of Justice, the darling of the people. He warmed himself with his virtue, and communicated his zealously

to those round him. He cracked his knee joints from time to time like a jockey, and thrust his arm threateningly into the air. The eccentric had been proved right. He knew the jests they made behind his back. But he'd been right. He knew it. And now his key-words and phrases excited not sneers but applause. Even the Government Front Bench was listening to him with attention.

"The Prime Minister referred to the Member for Merchison as 'his right honourable Friend.' Right honourable! After the report! Honourable or dishonourable? The terrible stain . . . the indelible stigma. . . . What opportunities did the Prime Minister have in mind for the Member's future service? In this House? In these corridors? . . . Will he be able to pass his fellow Members without lowering his eyes—a man who on his country's solemn occasions gambled beyond his means, neglected to pay his debts and broke the regulations he helped to frame? It is our duty to approve the Report, and in doing so we will be defending honesty and decency in public life. It is our responsibility to be a pattern for the people. For those who fail, let me say in the words of the poet, 'Never glad confident morning again.'"

He sat down amid cheers, and several Members stretched forward to pat his back. From the Opposition Front Bench Martindale turned, nodded his head in approval and winked.

"Mr. Culthorpe," the Speaker said, "and the Chamber rapidly emptied as a tired, white-haired Independent Member, notorious for the length and tediousness of his speeches, rose wringing his hands.

In the Terrace Bar during the afternoon and early evening, Blair sat in his usual seat, central among his friends, calling greetings to those who came in for a drink before dinner. The serving bar slopped with the overspill of beer as the customers, two-deep, reached forward for clusters of tankards and glasses, which they clumsily elevated before carrying them away to the tables within the room and on the terrace.

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Like a general, Blair was receiving situation reports of the debate from his visitors, so that at any moment he could have given a well-balanced summary of the situation, as complete as that of anyone who had sat all the time in the Chamber. With one eye on the annunciator, he knew almost exactly how long each speaker would take, and what addition or subtraction of custom he would cause to the bar.

"Hello, lad," he said to Smedley, who came in wiping his sweating bald head. "Did you make a good speech?"

"My usual high standard, Dick."

"Ay!" said Blair, puffing at his pipe. "Whose side were you on? Or didn't you know?"

"On the side of constitutional propriety," said Smedley, each syllable a cluck. "I said we ought to let him off—the charge wasn't properly drafted. Too vague."

"Well," said Blair. "I'm not a lawyer. I'm a miner." He turned to a shy young Opposition Member, who had been six months in the House after winning a bye-election. "I came straight here from the coal-face. Twenty-two years at the coal face. I'm not a lawyer," he added to remove any doubt. "The lawyers, lad," he put his arm on the young Member's shoulder and spoke close to his face, "can prove anything. Smedley, here, can get Erskine off. And Erskine'll feel guiltier than he ever was when he stood up. The only thing that'll satisfy Erskine is for him to get off the charge itself. That's how I see it. I'm a miner. Twenty-two years at the coal-face. It's common sense."

Smedley laughed a rumbling laugh that made his belly jump.

"I know why you don't like lawyers, Dick. We're perceptive. We have a searching intelligence that probes into subtleties."

"Subtleties be buggered!" said Blair, waving his tankard, and summoning the support of his neighbours. "If it's right, it's right. If it's wrong, it's wrong. To hell with subtleties!"

"How do you find Erskine?" asked Smedley.

"Not guilty!" said Blair promptly. "He's a good'n. So was his lass. I always said so. Not guilty, that's my verdict."

Not guilty—with a recommendation to mercy. Michael's had enough. At ten to ten I'm going up those stairs to vote for him, Whips or no bloody Whips."

"It's a free vote, Dick," said Smedley.

"I know, I know. But the Chief Whip keeps looking in the Aye Lobby."

"What sort of vote is it likely to be?" one of the Members at the table asked.

"He'll be lucky if he gets fifty votes," said Smedley. "The P.M. set the note. You know—it pains us more than the right honourable Gentleman."

"It's too hot for speeches tonight," said the young Member. "The Chamber's practically empty now."

They all looked through the open doors on to the Terrace, which was already crowded with Members and visitors seeking the evening cool of the river. The lamps of Westminster Bridge were lit, and shone crisp and yellow against the pink-flecked blue of the sky.

"It's a lovely evening," said Smedley, raising his tankard to Blair.

"Aye! It's a lovely evening Poor old Erskine! Poor bugger!"

They all stopped drinking as if in the silence of posthumous remembrance.

"But he's not dead yet," said Blair, and squinted at the annunciator spelling out with a rattle the name of the speaker.

"It's Morgan," said the young Member.

"Morgan!" echoed a number of voices from the bar. "Morgan's up! Morgan!"

The name travelled quickly to the Terrace, and soon a file of Members hurried through the bar on its way to the Chamber.

"Damn' awkward time to speak . . ."

"Typical of Morgan!"

"He wants us to digest it with our dinner."

"Hope he isn't going to pitch into Erskine."

"Wouldn't be beyond him."

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"Where does he stand in this?"

"He's a cunning devil."

"Hasn't said a word!"

"This has been a very interesting debate," said Morgan, temporising while the Chamber rapidly filled. "We've had some excellent speeches from all sides, most of them revealing a delicate balance on a moral pinpoint. I was, however, much impressed by the speech of my honourable Friend, the Member for Portlebay . . ." He twisted round to glance at Carrington.

"The honourable Gentleman had no doubts. He spoke with the certainty that comes from a simple understanding of what is good and what is evil. Indeed, as I listened to his censures on the right honourable Gentleman, I couldn't help thinking that he may well qualify one day to be remembered as the Cato of the North East."

The Chamber rippled with a smile, and the Prime Minister muttered something to himself.

"Sir," said Morgan, "I am not a classical scholar. A formal education in the classics eluded me. But I seem to remember from my scattered reading at night-school that Cato the Censor—Marcus Porcius—the Prime Minister will correct me if I'm wrong—indeed he is straining to do so . . ."

The Prime Minister shook his head affably, and said without rising, "I'm delighted that the right honourable Gentleman has come late in life to an appreciation of the classics."

"Cato the Censor," Morgan continued, "attacked the speculators, castigated luxury and provided Rome with up-to-date sewers. And all this he did in a rude, unvarnished manner. My honourable Friend has followed in that tradition . . ."

"What about the sewers?" someone interjected, and Morgan waved his hand. Members settled down to enjoy his unexpected attack on Carrington, but Morgan quickly turned from him to his main theme.

"I have asked myself, as I listened to the debate of what

relevancy it is to inveigh in lofty terms against corruption, when the right honourable Gentleman is fully acquitted in the Report of any suggestion that he engaged in any corrupt act? What purpose can it have except to taint the right honourable Gentleman's name by conjunction? I do beg the House to judge the right honourable Gentleman on the facts adduced in the Report, and not on the prejudices which have today been injected into some speeches.

"I must confess that I was a bit bewildered when I listened to some of the reproaches directed against the right honourable Gentleman. To hear them, a chance visitor might have thought, that no honourable Member of this House had ever been to a party or drunk alcohol or backed a horse or played cards for money. Is that the case?"

He stared round the Chamber at the silent Members.

"Is it the case that no Member has permitted himself these indulgences?" His cadenced voice became loud with indignation. "Let us throw away the white sheets that have draped this affair, and see it as it is. The right honourable Gentleman achieved a success in the form of the Anglo-American Agreement which some of us condemn. But that isn't the subject of this debate. The subject of this debate is, when we boil it down, 'Did he celebrate his success indiscreetly?' For my own part, I think he did. We say in Wales, 'If you lie down with dogs, you rise with fleas.' That was the right honourable Gentleman's misfortune. But dishonour? Dishonour? What's all this talk of dishonour?"

"The criticism of the right honourable Gentleman's indiscretion was an afterthought to the main charge. I put this plain question to honourable Members on all sides of the House. Is there anyone, looking inwards into his own heart and examining his own conscience—is there anyone so free from indiscretion in his life that he would condemn the right honourable Gentleman as dishonourable for an error of judgment, a lapse of good taste, the foolishness of a night out?"

Opposite and behind him, Members were nodding their heads in approval.

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"The Prime Minister," Morgan went on, "tried to equate the standards of public and private life. I cannot accept that equation in the way it is presented—that is to say as an equation with externally imposed standards of conduct. Shall the oath of a Minister not be trusted because he has broken a marriage vow?"

The Prime Minister raised himself to the despatch box, and Morgan resumed his seat.

"I made no reference at all to my right honourable Friend's marital life. It was exemplary."

There was a clamour of applause from the whole Chamber.

"Of course it was exemplary," Morgan said triumphantly. "That is the very point I am putting to the House—the very evidence of character I am submitting to rebut the Prime Minister's allegation that his private conduct made him unfit for his public duties."

During Morgan's half-hour speech he analysed the Report in detail, now scornfully, now approvingly, but all the time seeking to establish that the facts it exposed were in contradiction with its conclusions. He dealt with Curtis—"that sinister perjurer"—with Lady Applebourne—"the lady who lived on public relations"—and with Scott-Palmer—"that most devoted of Parliamentary Private Secretaries who went to bed, leaving his Minister to face the rigours of an American party." He ridiculed the Report as pretentious, unbalanced, scrambled and inconclusive. The House roared with laughter at his jibes against Erskine's friends who had abandoned him—"that orchestra of second fiddles who, after ditching their conductor, can neither keep in time nor tune." It cheered his solemn tribute to the work that Erskine had done.

"What's he after?" the Government Chief Whip whispered behind his hand to the Home Secretary.

"Making mischief, I suppose."

"He's telling the truth," said the Prime Minister. And added, "For once!"

"I ask the House," said Morgan, "not to accept this Report. I ask honourable Gentlemen to recall the dignity,

yes, and the honesty of the right honourable Gentleman's statement a few hours ago. He did not ask for mercy. That would have implied guilt. He asked only for justice. For myself, I would ask those who may at this moment be hovering in doubt to cast their decision on the side of mercy. It has been said that every trial is a trial for life—every sentence a sentence of death. The right honourable Gentleman has suffered greatly. The agony from within and the agony from without, the tragedy of his career and the tragedy of his private life, the loss of his wife and the loss of his office—they speak in the debate today. They speak for the right honourable Gentleman. They speak against the Report."

The cheering began and swelled even before he had spoken the last words.

The Members moved in a thick queue through the Division Lobbies, past the clerks who recorded the votes on their high desks, and back into the Chamber, which rapidly filled again with excited voices. From outside the tellers could be heard, "Ninety-one . . . ninety-two . . . ninety-three . . ."

"What does it look like, Dick?" Morgan asked Blair as he re-entered the Chamber.

"Not bad. That was a damn good speech you made, George. Bloody marvellous!" Blair spoke with awe.

A few minutes later the Speaker rose to his feet, and the Chamber fell into a hush as the four tellers advanced in step down the floor and bowed simultaneously.

"Ayes to the right, two hundred and one," said Dangerfield, reading from a piece of paper. "Noes to the left, two hundred and thirty-two."

A great cheer rose from both sides of the House, a din of conversation that went on even when the Speaker said, "The Noes have it! The Noes have it!"

"What does it mean?" Broughton asked the Chief Whip.

"A lot of embarrassment," answered the Chief Whip, before rising to move 'that this House do now adjourn.'

Once Dangerfield left the Chamber, he half ran up the

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stairs to Erskine's room. It was in darkness. He switched on the light and asked the telephone operator if she knew where Erskine was.

"I don't know, sir," she replied. "I haven't had any calls from him all day."

Dangerfield telephoned the Ministry and was told that Erskine was probably still in the House. There was no reply from his flat.

Hurrying anxiously to the barrier in the Central Lobby, Dangerfield asked Eves, the policeman on duty, if he had seen him.

"Yes, sir," said Eves. "He left about five. Soon after he made his statement."

"Thank you," said Dangerfield. "Thank you." He went to a telephone booth, and began to leave messages for Erskine at his clubs.

The tape-machine outside the Library, surrounded by a group of Members, was stuttering the headlines, "Commons Surprise. Select Committee Report Rejected. Majority for Erskine."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Airport

SHE pressed the button, got her pennies back and tried again. Still the drone into emptiness, and no reply. The heat inside the booth was stifling, and the mouthpiece gave off an unpleasant stench as if it had accumulated and harboured the breath of ten thousand conversations in its sour hollow. She opened the heavy door and held it ajar, pressing with its spring against her wrist while she tried the number again. She knew he wouldn't be there, but she felt that she had to try. From the corner of her eye she looked out at a new coach which had arrived, and was already vomiting its passengers into the waiting-room. Helen looked at them with distaste, each one an enemy for not being Spencer, and then she felt a panic beset her.

"Good day for flying, Miss," the taxi-driver had said, as Helen paid him at London Airport. A drift of white cloud over the even blue sky confirmed his words, and Helen, in a thank-offering, increased by another half-a-crown the tip which she was feeding into his hand. All the way from London, racing by half an hour the coach from the terminal which Spencer and the other passengers would be taking, she had thought with apprehension and anxiety of the possible obstructions to their arrangements. The taxi might lose a wheel, and she would be stranded by the by-pass while Spencer, waiting with dwindling hope, would at last, when the flight number was called, return home in anger and disappointment. Or perhaps the road would be up, and the taxi would have to make a detour which would bring them

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to some far-off place away from the airport where the driver would say, "Sorry, Miss, we'll have to go back."

But she had arrived without mishap as she might have done on any other day—except that this was a special day, a good day for flying. A porter, an Irishman by his voice, was taking her two cases of parchment-skin luggage and was guiding her to the weighing-machine in the reception hall. Already, a number of other passengers, about to fly to Brussels, were sitting in the wicker arm-chairs, overwarm in travelling coats, with labelled hand-luggage on their knees and at their feet. Helen went to the desk to check her ticket and her place on the aeroplane, and then, with a glance at the clock, with its regular, jerking second-hand, she walked to the buffet and ordered herself a cup of coffee. "There's oceans of time," she said to herself. It was twenty-five to twelve, and the coach wasn't due till twelve o'clock for the 12.30 aeroplane to Paris.

She opened her white travelling bag and examined her papers methodically—passport, travellers' cheques, English currency and her flight ticket. Flight 534.

The day before yesterday she had spoken to Spencer, had confirmed the time of their departure, the route and service they would use, and the method of their meeting. It was the second time only that he had spoken to her since the night of Vaughan's return from Cwmbrau which she remembered with a black disgust. At first Spencer had kept saying, "It's all so sordid," and had wanted to keep away from her till the election was over. But she had convinced him that it was unnecessary. She knew her husband well. She assured Spencer he wouldn't do anything about it. In her handbag was a letter Vaughan had sent her from Cwmbrau. It ended, "If I had done anything to merit your treatment of me—if I hadn't always given you all my love and devotion! I only ask one thing. Have I, accidentally, through misunderstanding, done anything to hurt you that you have repaid me in this terrible way?" It was a begging letter. She hadn't shown it to Spencer. He wouldn't have liked it.

Helen and Spencer had spoken to each other exultantly

and conspiratorially as they made their plans, precisely but cryptically, for fear that their conversation might be overheard. And now Helen was afflicted with a colic of doubt. Had she perhaps failed to understand him after all? Was he absolutely sure of the date? Had he realized that they were to meet at London Airport and not at Northolt? He had asked her not to telephone him yesterday because he had to spend the whole day in Fleet Street, completing the dispositions for his new assignment in Paris, and attending a farewell dinner in the evening.

There was no question of him remaining in the Lobby after the Select Committee's Report. It would have been impossible for him to meet Erskine day after day, quite apart from the general feeling in the Gallery and among Lobby Correspondents that he had been responsible in great measure for the taint which Curtis had imported to the House. But Helen had no regrets. She was glad that Spencer would be close to her in Paris where she could live—perhaps for a few months in the year, perhaps longer—her plans were uncertain—but at any rate, where they would be together in a city which she loved; and at the same time, she was happy that Erskine had been acquitted.

The last months of what had seemed to her an undeserved persecution, both by Erskine's colleagues and the Press, had formed a background of unhappiness to her connection with Spencer, whose unrelenting vendetta against Erskine demanded from her a constant distortion of her judgment and the repeated pardon of her love. She could forgive Spencer more easily for his sudden rages against herself, balmed as they were by a rapid tenderness, than she could the nagging hostility which he had shown towards Erskine even in the moment of his deepest distress. When Jane had died Spencer had telephoned to tell her the news. Although she had regarded Jane with a light contempt for the simplicity of her devotion to Erskine, and, during the time of her own liaison with him, had added pity to her tolerance, she had always liked Jane and never wished her ill. She had never sought to inflict personal harm on her, even by depriving

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her of her complacency. Helen's few meetings with Erskine, furtive and brief, had had a quality of excitement and danger, which in itself was contenting and had no need to be sharpened by a triumph over Jane.

When Spencer had told her about Jane, a deep grief had affected her, not merely for Jane, but for Erskine and herself as well. It was as though a whole phase of her life were ended, the familiar things of her experience irrevocably destroyed. Michael and Jane. The two names had always been intimate, connected in a mutual dependence. It had been almost impossible to think of one without the other.

"How absolutely terrible!" she said to Spencer. "How did it happen?" He paused and said, "She did herself in. Couldn't stand him a minute longer."

She somehow thought that he expected her to laugh, but she hadn't even protested against his words. She had merely said, "I'll ring you tomorrow, Tony," and had gone to her bedroom and wept. Sometimes she remembered his words with a frigid distaste, the savour of a stranger. Someone with whom she had neither sympathy nor identification. The emotion which she felt in his presence and at his touch, supplanting the listlessness and apathy of her life with its darting and finally pervasive excitement, was dead for that moment of memory.

"Will passengers for Brussels please proceed to the coach?" The dominating voice of the loud-speaker set up an agitated stir among the passengers waiting in the arm-chairs, and they moved in a hesitant crocodile to the door where a British European Airways stewardess detained them before their names were ticked off by the air hostess who was to accompany them to the airfield. Helen watched benevolently a family party saying good-bye to a young woman who was about to enter the bus. An aged grandmother and grandfather, a trio of children, a tired looking middle-aged man, all embraced her processionally, reluctant for her to go. Helen looked away, suddenly irritated by the sentimental scene and thinking to herself that she hated all

leave-taking, and today she wanted nothing less in the world than for anyone, related or remote, to bid her farewell.

When the passengers had been decanted from the waiting-room into the bus, taking with them their uneasiness, there was an interval of tranquillity. Once they had gone, Helen walked round the room of Enquiries.

"Could you tell me what time the coach for Flight 534 is due from Kensington?" she asked.

The girl behind the counter smiled agreeably and looked up her schedule.

"It's due here at twelve," the girl answered.

"Thank you so much," said Helen, and walked out to the arrival court, where two coaches which had just arrived were unloading passengers.

"Are those coaches from Kensington?" she asked her porter.

"Yes, Miss," he said.

"Rather early, aren't they?" she asked. The time was ten to twelve.

"No, Miss," he replied. "They're dead on time. They're for the tourist Transatlantic flight."

"Ah," she said. She had been watching with doubt an unusual assembly of travellers. An American with a large-brimmed hat, a young woman, fair-haired with a half-caste baby, two slim Filipinos, a group of American girl students, short haired and pale, all apparently unrelated and unconnected, yet with the common anxiety on their faces of those who embark on long and unfamiliar journeys. Helen looked away from them with an inner displeasure. They had nothing to do with her. To pass the minutes of waiting, she went to the bookstall and glanced casually over the brightly coloured magazines and books. *Time*, *Life*, *Picture Post*—they lay exposed in their familiar attitudes of offering for transient pleasure to travellers. She picked up an afternoon paper, and laid it down. She opened the pages of a magazine, and came almost immediately on a photograph of Erskine walking with what seemed like a crouch, after one of the hearings of the Select Committee. She closed the pages hurriedly and

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was about to turn away when she heard behind her a crisp, familiar voice saying, "Helen, dear, what on earth are you doing here?"

"Oh, Madeleine," said Helen, taking her hand. "What a lovely suit!"

She looked calmly at the grey silk costume that Lady Pembury was wearing and said, "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see Mary Healey off. She's doing the Collections for us, but she's such a scatterbrain, I wanted to make sure she really goes. Are you on this 'plane?"

"Yes," said Helen. "I have to go to Paris for a few days."

At first, she had been startled by Madeleine's appearance, but with a sudden resolve, she had decided that she had no wish to conceal her meeting with Spencer. On the contrary, she had an access of pride that she was going away with her lover. She wanted everyone to know. The thought that whatever happened with Vaughan, whether he divorced her or not, she would still have Tony, made her feel arrogant and self-sufficient.

"Let's have a drink," said Madeleine.

"A very quick one," Helen replied.

They went to the bar and Madeleine ordered two dry Martinis.

"Oh, darling," said Madeleine. A squeal of discovery and remembrance. "Congratulations. Congratulations, darling. It really was terrific."

"What?" Helen asked in bewilderment, putting down her glass.

"What, the girl asks," said Madeleine. "As if she doesn't know."

"I really don't know what you're talking about," said Helen, her social smile fading as her irritation rose.

"Cwmbrau! Cwmbrau! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Oh, Madeleine! Darling! I'm mad! Stark raving mad."

She had listened to the eight o'clock news for the result of the Cwmbrau election, which had not been declared the night before owing to the difficulty which they had had in

collecting some of the ballot boxes from an isolated village on the mountain side. The B.B.C. had told her that there had been three recounts, and that the result would be declared later in the day. And when she had looked at the headlines of the afternoon papers she had seen no mention at all of the election except for the recounts. Cwmbrau seemed to her a dim and forgotten association, belonging to the period of Jane and Erskine, Huberton and all the others whom now she was about to leave. She half resented the fact that Madeleine Pembury was tugging her back to an interest in the election for, when she had said the word 'Cwmbrau,' the tremor that her congratulations had aroused became the symptom of a compelling interest. This was a moment that she had always hoped and dreamed of. She had always yearned for Vaughan to return to the House. That was the starting point of all her reveries of influence and power in which she was the focus of admiration and wonder, the object of petition by the influential, the proud, the admirable and the sought-after.

"I don't know a thing," she said. "Is it out? What was the result?" And then telling the lie with an inward shame, "I spoke to John this morning—and he was rather pessimistic."

"Oh, but my dear, he's in. It's probably in the Stop Press."

She took Helen's arm and led her over to the bookstall where she bought an afternoon paper. The women peered together at the cricket results in the Stop Press, and Helen in disappointment said, "Nothing. You dreamt it all, Madeleine."

She glanced at the door where a double-decker coach had drawn up, from which passengers were already descending.

"Here you are, Miss," the porter called out. And Helen looked hurriedly at Madeleine who was still fluttering the pages of the paper. In an instant, the sullen regrets which the mention of Cwmbrau had conjured up in her utterly disappeared. All that she felt was a vestigial embarrassment as if

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she had been cheated into an indiscreet emotion. Now, she wanted to get rid of Madeleine as quickly as possible. At any moment Tony might come through the door and she would have to endure the affected casualness of Madeleine at the coincidence of their meeting. She would have to introduce him to Mary from whom she had always kept him carefully apart. Instead of their private escape, they would have an accompanying warder, an observer, a fellow-passenger, a smile. . . on. . .

"Well, darling," she began, when Madeleine called out without looking up from the paper:

"It's here! It's here! I told you it was. Look! Majority eighty-three. Eighty-three. Isn't that exciting? Gerald rang me this morning to tell me. I'm so pleased. . . . Aren't you happy, darling?"

Helen had looked at her dully, but now smiled contentedly.

"Of course, I'm happy," she replied. "I'm so happy for John too. It'll do him the world of good."

"Oh!" said Madeleine. "Well, here comes Mary, beautiful and bewildered. I'd better look after her."

Released, Helen sent a flutter of her fingers to them both and, breathing quickly, went to meet the last dark shapes that were descending from the coach.

"Are you sure?" she said to the driver of the coach for the second time, "Are you sure that this is the only bus for the 12.30 'plane?"

"Quite sure, Madam," he replied. "Maybe your friends are coming on by private car. Sometimes they come on by taxi when they miss the coach. It's hard to get them all on time."

"Yes," said Helen, abruptly.

The passengers for Flight 534 had already passed through the Customs, and she had hoped that by the time she had completed the formalities she would have found Spencer, apologetic and resentful, hurrying his luggage through the hall. She looked hopefully round the waiting-room and then hastened in a half run, following the red signs that pointed

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to the restaurant, in the hope that perhaps he had after all come early and been waiting for her the whole time at his table in the restaurant. The restaurant was half empty, and she looked eagerly round for the face that would have eased the heavy weight that had grown up in her chest and was now pressing against her throat. It was impossible that he shouldn't be there. She had made him swear that he would be on time. "You will be early," she had said. "I promise," he had replied. "I want you to swear it, Tony," she had said. "Don't you believe me?" he had replied. "No," she had said. "I want you to swear." And he had sworn solemnly that he would arrive in time for the 'plane. She strengthened herself with the recollection, and returned to the waiting-room accompanied by the voice from the loudspeaker, "Will passengers for Paris, Flight 534, please proceed to the——" The last words were submerged by the twin sounds of a jet aircraft passing overhead with a howl of almost unbearable intensity, and the gentler roar of an airliner coming in to land.

The passengers for Flight 534 were mostly business men with a group of American tourists and a schoolmaster, accompanying five boys. The boys moved in disciplined step towards the door, but as Helen went forward despairingly to see whether Spencer had arrived, they stood back to let her pass.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Oh, please," a polite boy said.

She looked past him in exasperation, and said to the porter, "I may not be going on this 'plane."

"Well, they'll be charging you, Miss," he said.

"Never mind," she said.

The queue was dwindling as the last passengers mounted into the coach, and Helen was left facing the air-hostess with the tally sheet.

"Mrs. Vaughan?" she asked.

"Yes," said Helen. "I'm sorry. I have to cancel. I'm not going."

"Oh, but we've got you down," said the hostess.

"I'm not going," said Helen. "I'm sorry."

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The girl shrugged her shoulders and the passengers lining the side of the coach peered down over the half-open window at Helen standing alone, holding her white handbag. When the coach drew away the porter came up to her and said, "I'm trying to get your baggage off-loaded, Miss, but it might have to have a ride to Paris and back."

"Never mind," said Helen. "It doesn't matter. Is there a telephone here?"

She telephoned to Spencer at his flat, but all she could hear was a drone into emptiness from the other end.

He must have had an accident somewhere on the by-pass, she said to herself. At this moment, while she was hating him, he was lying perhaps under the wreckage of a car with a steering wheel crushed against his chest. Something must have happened. He'd sworn that he'd come. She left the pennies in the machine and hurried out to the door. The porter carrying another passenger's luggage looked at her sympathetically, and before she could speak said to her, "This one's for Madrid, Miss—the one-thirty."

She went up to the driver standing by the bonnet of the coach, and said, "You didn't pass any accidents on the road, did you?"

"Not that I saw," he answered cautiously. "If there were, they must have been cleaned up by the time when we went past."

The passengers for Madrid sat at ease. They had another quarter of an hour before they had to pass through Customs. All the arm-chairs were taken, and Helen stood by the book-stall looking again at the magazines and the outspread newspapers.

"Cwmbrau result. Vaughan wins," said the deep black headlines of the Second Edition on the remade front pages.

"He won't come," Helen said to herself. "He won't come. He never intended to. He just wanted to fob me off."

She thought of him with a sick frustration of hatred and longing. He had never intended to come. He had merely wanted to get her out of the way. But why? she asked her-

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self. Why? Why? Why? Why had he wanted to go through the elaborate, farcical procedure of arranging to meet her at the airport? Why, in God's name, had he made a fool of her in this horrible, sadistic way? Her bitterness mounted in her as she thought of the plans which she had made for their stay in France, of all the places where she had intended to take him, of the avenues where they would have walked, the *boîtes* where they would have danced, the restaurants where they would have eaten.

The voice of the loudspeaker came like an unguent.

"Will Mrs. Vaughan please come to the reception desk where there is a telegram awaiting her."

The message was repeated, and she quickened her pace. She'd been wrong. She accused herself happily. She smiled to herself in the thought that her harsh judgments of Spencer had been unfounded, that he had been detained, and that for the anguish of the last hour there had been reason and excuse.

"Mrs. Vaughan?" asked the smiling clerk at the Reception desk.

Helen nodded her head, but couldn't speak. She moved her lips, took the telegram, and tore open the thin envelope.

"Sorry, darling," it said. "Tried to get you last night. Orders inflexible. Assigned six months Rome instead Paris. Stop. See you next Spring. Tony."

She caught the smiling eyes of the receptionist and smiled back at her.

"We can take a reply," said the receptionist.

"There's no reply," Helen answered.

Spencer raised his head from the rail over which he had been watching the spuming furrow, driven by the ship, through the olive-green waters. He had been thinking of Helen with tenderness. She'd forgive him, and understand. He knew she would. She was like that. And if she didn't—well, it couldn't be helped. The whole situation was getting altogether too much for him. He didn't want to get mixed up in a divorce case. He was glad he'd managed to switch

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assignments. He liked Helen well enough. She had always been devoted and affectionate. He had been proud of her, while Vaughan was there to look after her. But he simply couldn't accept responsibility for her on her own. That would be too much.

Poor Helen. He thought of her at the airport. Poor Helen. He breathed deeply the salt-flecked air. He felt on holiday—fit and released. He was wearing a grey suit with a small check, and a cap. The girl at his side wore a yellow scarf over her hair.

"You know, Lavinia, I love the sea," he said.

"Do you?" she answered absently.

She was already sorry that she had promised to travel with Spencer to Rome. His eager conversation, his interest in politics and what she had once heard described by a friend at RADA as "his plummy fluency" all irritated her. Once he had got hold of a theme he worried it unrelentingly until she wanted to say, "Do shut up," and "Go away." She had already noticed that Arnold Martin was on the boat, and she was thinking to herself that if she could get rid of Spencer for half an hour, she might enjoy her visit to Rome after all.

"I love the sea, Lavinia," he said again.

"I prefer flying," she said, and looked up at an aeroplane quivering like a silver minnow across the heat haze of the sky.

"I hate 'planes," he said. "Saw too much of them in the R.A.F. Would you like to go on the Captain's bridge? He's a friend of mine. I could easily arrange it. We could then look down on all our fellow passengers."

She was about to say "No thanks, I hate climbing," when she saw Arnold Martin standing, tall and young and fair, shaking hands with some people whom he had met.

"Yes, do, Tony," she said. "And don't come back till you've arranged it."

He smiled to her, grateful that at last after two hours of sulkiness she had admitted him to her service. He felt senior and protective. He was at least ten years older than she was.

"All right, darling," he said. "But don't go too far away."

She watched him as he went up to an officer in order to ask permission for their visit to the bridge. When she saw him slowly climbing she went over to Martin and said, "Hello, Arnold. I hear you're doing a picture in Rome."

At Uxbridge, Helen told the taxi-driver to stop at the post office. Then she went decisively to the desk and wrote on a telegram form:

"Congratulations on wonderful victory Stop Look forward your return to London Stop Will tell you how sorry I am for all the rest when we meet Stop Love Helen."

"Send it 'Greetings,' will you," she said to the girl behind the counter.

"What's this word?" the girl asked.

"Cwmbrau," said Helen. "C-W-M-B-R-A-U."

In two days' time she would lie in her bed watching the lights from passing cars circling her ceiling and dying in darkness, while above her, she would see John's face. She would count to twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Diminishing. Twenty-nine. Fading. Thirty. Thirty-one . . . Thir . . . Even that was tolerable. And as she sat back in the taxi, she thought of the House of Commons, and dinners and receptions and parties, and Tony and Tony and Tony, and burst into tears, saying to herself, "Oh, God, I'm so unhappy."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Who Goes Home?

IN NEW PALACE Yard the cars were parked in diagonals, waiting for the Members who soon after ten o'clock would come, released, to change its tidy desert into a circus of traffic, a confusion of monitory blasts from reversing, manœuvring cars and the sudden blaze of headlights, as the policeman at the gate filtered the vehicles into the Street. Erskine, with his head lowered, anxious to avoid greeting or conversation, skirted the backs of the cars, away from the entrance to Westminster Hall. He glanced at the illuminated face of Big Ben, with its hands at twenty-five to ten, and the light in the clock tower, and hurried under the arch through the Speaker's Court into the Terrace Corridor. Except for an occasional messenger or attendant, who stood aside, respectfully impersonal, by the glass cases of medals and the long rows of engravings of forgotten Parliamentarians, to let him pass, it was empty of people.

Erskine waited in the shadows of the steps till a group of Members on their way to the Chamber had gone by. Then he moved quickly to the Library Floor, past the quiet Smoking Room towards the Prime Minister's Room. The policeman at the Library Door said, "Good-evening, sir." Erskine looked away.

Since the morning when he had received the Prime Minister's letter, Erskine had sat alone in his flat thinking of Jane. After the door had been broken down and the body discovered, the maid had left in a scene of hysterical shock. Through a gauze of weariness, he had seen Dangerfield's sister arrive with a nurse to take the baby to Scotland. And

all this had happened to him as if it were being projected into his consciousness from a theatre in which he himself was both actor and spectator.

Even when he had made his statement in the House, he had been thinking all the time of Jane with a desperate, exhausted longing, an incredulity that in the mornings awoke him, groping with his fingers for her head, refusing to believe he was awake. He had cut his finger when opening a soda-water bottle, and Jane had washed it and banded it with a bandage. He wore it unchanged, and he had sat in the flat looking at it, where she had tied the knot with her fingers and tightened it with her teeth. The bandage was grimy, and as Erskine stared at it he could hear in his mind her voice, her proud voice, her loving voice, speaking his name. Dead. He said the word, and stared at the glass and ornaments that he had so often seen her arrange. The white telephone. The curtains she had chosen.

Dead. He said the word again. Never. Never. Never. Never. He would never see her again., Never sense her voice or her laugh or her touch, her reproach or her tenderness, never know her presence again. All day he had sat in the flat and thought of his dead wife. In the evening he shaved, and then walked through Hyde Park and St. James's Park to Westminster. "Jane," he said to himself. "My darling Jane. My darling, darling Jane!"

Behind the green-shaded lamp that threw a downward light on the table, leaving the rest of his room in semi-darkness, the Prime Minister, his dinner-jacket pouting under his chin, sat facing Erskine, who again said, "I'm sorry, sir. I can't change my mind."

The Prime Minister prodded the base of the lamp till the periphery of its light circled Erskine's head and shoulders. "The light hurts my eyes," he said, and fell into a prolonged silence, which he waited for Erskine to break.

Like a bass to a treble, Erskine's yearning for Jane accompanied their speech. Or like an unwinding of his bowels in a detailed agony. A rhythm of torment to the

Prime Minister's silence. The clock ticking in his empty flat. He had no care whether their meeting continued or not. In lassitude, he detached his replies from his secret thoughts.

"I can't come back," he said.

"But it's unnecessary," the Prime Minister answered, with a brusque irritation.

He had had to leave a dinner which the Speaker had been giving in honour of an Indonesian Delegation, and his duties struggled with his somnolence. "Besides," he said, "we can't afford to lose another bye-election. You've got to think of the Party, Michael."

Erskine looked up quickly.

"We can't escape the issue," he said. "We can't dodge it. It will be there whatever happens to me. Anglo-American relations are the central issue of our time. From now on every British election—bye-election or General Election—will have to be fought on that theme. It was only an accident that the Agreement became entangled with me at Cwmbrau. It was only an accident that we lost."

He rose to his feet and pushed the chair from behind him.

"If the Party's got guts and courage, we'll go into every election challenging the Opposition on the subject of Anglo-American relations. I would still resign even if it mean that the Party would lose the bye-election at Merchison. But believe me, it won't mean that."

He stood eagerly at the table, tapping the writing-pad in front of the Prime Minister.

"Take up this challenge. Fight for my seat on the question of the Anglo-American Agreement, and you'll find that they'll endorse it. Then go to the country, and come back with a working majority. At the moment we're hobbling along. With another thirty we could——"

"No," said the Prime Minister decisively. "You must leave the Party's strategy to me. I'm not on that point at the moment. I'm dealing with a simple, tactical situation. If you go, Michael, it will be a plea of guilty, not only for you, but for the Party as well. The moment it says on the tape that you've applied for the Chiltern Hundreds our

stock will sag. Every marginal seat will turn against us. It will mean that whatever the verdict of the House yesterday, you, by your resignation, will have avowed that the Agreement was diseased."

"But yesterday, sir . . ."

"Yesterday I was prosecuting," said the Prime Minister. "On balance it was my duty. I say on balance, because I never took the view of some of your friends that you were absolutely at fault. That is the sin of our age—the belief in dogmatic absolutes. We've lost the virtue of moderate scepticism. After the war—perhaps it was the war itself—the Party was weaned briefly from its certainties, but, once again we are back in a period when it demands authority as a substitute for judgment."

His voice mumbled as he brooded on the middle-distance of his own thoughts.

"Who was it who tried to condemn you?" he began again, raising his right hand, a delicate, long-fingered hand, and listing the names of some of the speakers in the debate. "A handful of eminent constitutionalists, fanatics of Standing Orders, Simon Purists——"

"And several hundred private Members," Erskine interrupted. "It's no good, Prime Minister. You were right when you spoke about absolutes. Every plea of innocence is tainted with a plea of guilt. Mine was no different."

"In what sense?"

"In the most fundamental sense. When I look back on America I think it fortuitous that I gambled after the Agreement was initialled and not before—fortuitous that I allowed Curtis to claim friendship later and not sooner—fortuitous that I borrowed money when I did and not before. I was innocent of financial corruption, but I'm guilty—I've thought a lot about this since Jane died—I'm guilty of another kind of corruption. To have entertained myself with men like Curtis and women like Lady Applebourne—that was an act of infidelity to my own standards. I betrayed them for a few drinks, some flattery and a little excitement."

"You might take a lesson from Morgan," said the Prime

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Minister, removing a wisp of grey hair from his tall, white forehead. "He regards all guilt as tinged with innocence. Mark you, these refinements don't go down well in our Party. Our fellows are pretty simple-minded. They don't take easily to paradoxes. Nor do the Whips. In the House there has to be a pre-determined Aye or No. It's rough morality; but it works. After all, if every vote were a free one, and Morgans were let loose with their contradictions, most of the chaps would have to stay at home. They'd never know how to vote. . . ."

In the pause, Erskine examined the old man's head, sunken into his shoulders—the leader, liberal in everything except in conserving his patriarchy, intolerant of all dogmas except those he expounded himself, rigid in all his standards except when they threatened his Party. Jane's voice joined itself with the Prime Minister's next sentence, a burden of memory carried in the aching procession of the hours and seasons of the past. The key turned in the lock of the empty flat. No more the voice in the darkness welcoming his return from the House at midnight. My darling Jane.

"Too much conscience," the Prime Minister went on, "leads to anarchy. Disraeli said, 'A Party is organised opinion.' It's more than that. The Party system is a system of organised conscience. It's bad for the soul, but good for the nation. It is our duty, our dominant duty, to retain power and guide the country. That is why we're in politics."

"Is that the meaning of political conscience?" Erskine asked.

Jane sat near him at Huberton behind the candles, while de Saucigny explained his meaning of political conscience.

"I think so," said the Prime Minister. "It judges conduct by the single question, 'Does it serve to achieve power for those who can best use it?'"

"And the standard of 'best?'"

"Is a subjective one. I ought to say in fairness," the Prime Minister continued, "that our prejudices are all in our own favour."

"You used to say that of Morgan."

"Morgan is interested in power because in his narrow view he could use it better than ourselves. But to tell the truth, he is a revolutionary manncled to the cart of our traditions. He thinks he is guiding our future. He isn't. Our future is guiding him. Our future guides him while our past pushes him along. Individualists will never make revolutions in Britain. We've gone too far.' The impetus of our history is too great for our main direction ever to be changed. We may civilise our behaviour and improve our manners.' But our future is already determined by our past."

"Does it not depend," Erskine asked, "on whether Morgan, as an act of political conscience, discovers a new technique of power?" (The treble to the bass.)

"No," said the Prime Minister unhesitatingly. "If the Opposition discovers a new technique of power, we will naturally adopt it, either forthwith, or at most with the delay of a General Election and a new Parliament."

The expression on the Prime Minister's face changed from one of banter to solemnity.

"Michael," he said, "let us end this exercise in political theory. I want you to consider very carefully what you are about to do. I'm an old man—oh, yes, a very old man. Don't think, because I can stand at the despatch box day after day, catching the bolts and tossing them back, that I am anything else but an old man who has seen the generation of his youth thrown away"—he paused—"and the generation of his old age droop one by one."

He looked up with a smile to Erskine.

"No, Michael. I'm an old stone, eroded by the rivers of time—almost rubbed away. There's not much left for me except—perhaps—a few lines of history. I've seen men come and go in the House. I've seen whole Parliaments thrown up by some upheaval of public sentiment, and suddenly dissolved like those islands that rise from the sea and briefly put on a luxurious tropical vegetation, only to submerge without a trace. They've gone, and nothing remains. But you, Michael—you. You were a rare person. You. Jane. Everything about you was laden with hope—hope and promise. Where is it gone?"

Erskine was silent.

"When I spoke to you before of another bye-election I spoke half in jest. Another bye-election would be a bore—not a disaster. Of course we would fight it on Anglo-American relations. Of course, that's the issue of our time. But I spoke of a bye-election, Michael, because I want you to stay. Go on the back-benches for a time. Men have done it before. Start again, and in two years' time, with another Parliament, you will return to your position in the country and the Party."

"Your position in the country and the Party," said Jane. She took the bouquet, and the police pressed aside the crowd at the side door. He was tired and pleased. "Was I good?" "You were perfect." Uncritical. But Lady Applebourne. That was an obsession that he couldn't exorcise. "Swear, Michael." "I swear." "Not for a moment?" "Not for a moment." "Swear, Michael." "I swear." "I swear." Interminable. "I swear there was no one." "Not even Lady Applebourne?" "No. Not for a moment." "Swear, Michael." "I swear." The conversations at night when the Report was due. Page 78, Paragraph 87. "Lady Applebourne?" "Not Lady Applebourne. I never slept with her, never kissed her." "You never touched her?" "I shook hands with her." I wasn't guilty of her.

"But Helen?" "That was a long time ago." Guilty or not guilty? Guilty—secretly guilty—guilt tinged with innocence. Innocence tainted with guilt. A long, long, long time ago when Jane was alive.

"Well, Michael?" the Prime Minister asked suddenly. Erskine shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't. The story's over. It doesn't go on without Jane. I've thought for days—endlessly since Jane's death—about all this. If she'd been alive, she would have helped. But all I have discovered is that between the poles of right and wrong there's a great neutral area in which most men wander. We wander there—unknowing, I think, that we are in twilight. Most of the time we think that everything is clear—good, bad, happy, sad, guilty, innocent. There is never a condition for which we can't find an exact antonym."

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The Prime Minister listened with his eyes half closed.

"But sometimes," said Erskine, "one wakes up and realises that there is this—this vast area of graded values, which most of us inhabit under the illusion that we live in a world of absolutes. It's in that moment of illumination that it becomes impossible to vote Aye or No about one's own conduct—impossible to give oneself an acquittal—impossible for me to return to the House as if nothing had ever happened."

"Even though all this is forgotten in a year's time?"

"Even though it's forgotten."

*"Durum: sed levius fit patientia,
Quidquid corrigere est nefas . . ."*

the Prime Minister said, and walked round the table to put his hand on Erskine's shoulder.

"Time ends everything. I can't persist. Be patient, Michael, and compassionate—even to yourself."

Erskine lowered his head, and for a moment closed his eyes.

"We'll have a drink," said the Prime Minister.

He took Erskine's arm and walked with him past the cluster of Members leaving the Chamber towards the rapidly filling Smoking Room, where he led the way to his customary seat.

While Erskine sat drinking with the Prime Minister, the Members nearest to them finished their drinks and left more quickly than usual, leaving a barren circle of chairs. The Home Secretary and the Chief Whip came over to greet them. The Home Secretary, who had voted in favour of the Select Committee's Report, said cordially, "We really must do something about the air-conditioning of the Chamber. They seem to imagine that the average Member likes nothing better than a cold sweat."

The Chief Whip said, "I've been trying to reach you, Michael. Martindale wants a 'pair,' but he won't take

anything less than a Minister. Would you like a 'pair' for a week?"

Erskine looked thoughtfully at them both, and said to the Chief Whip, "I've written to you today."

The Prime Minister, as if he hadn't heard the conversation, said, "When I was a middle-aged Member of Parliament who hadn't put pads on for twenty-five years, I was chosen to play for the Lords and Commons versus the Law Society . . ."

The Ministers who had heard the story before edged themselves away.

"At Ventnor," the Prime Minister went on, "I was due to go in at Number Five." His voice was ruminant, munching and regurgitating his memories. "It was a wonderful day—the whole field like a bowling green, a great copper beech on the boundary, a hazard for the batsmen, protection for the fielders. I spent half an hour at the nets to find out if I could see the ball. I couldn't. I was bowled four times by the vice-captain, Parkinson, a gorilla who hit five sixes that day. But I was confident, Michael. I knew that once I went into the crease I could knock up fifty at least, without a flicker. I went in." He drained his glass of whisky. "I was facing the slow man—the sort of fellow who entails estates." He began to bat with his glass. "I saw the ball come, curling on the off, and I stopped it. I sliced the second one, and then I heard behind me a sort of gentle snicker. And when I looked round—well, there were my balls on the grass."

"It's a melancholy story, sir," said Erskine.

The Prime Minister ignored the comment. "But there was an Opposition Member—a red-faced Old Etonian who'd strayed into the wrong Party—Fitzmaurice. who, when I came back, saddened and humiliated, said—I can hear him now—he said, 'Hard luck, old chap! That ball would have beaten Grace.'"

Erskine smiled affectionately at the Prime Minister.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I hope the consolation in your parable is fitting. Did you make a century in your next game?"

"No," said the Prime Minister, heaving himself to his feet. "There was no next game for me. I was dropped. But it was decent of Fitzmaurice all the same. What will you do, Michael?"

"I shall begin again. Perhaps work with my hands."

"To work with his hands is the vicious daydream of all intellectuals. It never comes to anything. It's Onan's crime. . . . But sometimes—the House—we have the illusion that it's the pivot of the world—that there's scarcely anything outside that matters. We exaggerate the importance of our day-to-day affairs till we think that nothing else exists. Yet it does. There's the whole of life beyond these walls that goes on—indifferent to whatever happens here. Somewhere in that life you will find an occasion for your talents, a place for your abilities. . . . And now . . ."

The Prime Minister stood for a few moments shaking Erskine's hand, while the Members at the tables round the room regarded him with curiosity.

"Good-night!" he said at last. "Twenty past ten. It's time for insomnia."

At the door Erskine, who had followed the Prime Minister after a short interval, met Morgan hurrying in for a drink before the House rose. The two men stared at each other with the blankness which each had assumed during many years, and which they only rarely abandoned. For a moment Erskine wanted to speak, to greet Morgan and thank him for his speech. But Morgan, caught within his own habit of hostility, glanced away, only pausing to let Erskine pass.

Erskine walked to the end of the corridor without meeting any other Member, and stopped at the locker he used to use when he was a back-bencher. He opened it with the key which he had kept on his chain, and its contents began to slide out—a *Penguin* on Mediaeval Customs, a collection of statistics for exports in 1906, a speech, carefully typed and tabulated, which he had failed to deliver because he hadn't been called, a library-book on Constitutional Government, an unopened letter from an eccentric who used to

WHO GOES HOME?

write to him every day, a few newspaper cuttings, three copies of Hansard, a United Nations report, a grey tie, a clutter of invitations to Mr. and Mrs. Michael Erskine, and a powder-compact which Jane had once left in the House. Erskine took the powder-compact, and pushed the rest back. He had to press hard against the fluted oak door before he could turn the key.

As he did so, the policeman on duty in the Central Lobby called out "Who goes home?" a long, wailing summons that was taken up and relayed through the corridors, as if it would wake the long dead Members whom once it assembled to meet the linkmen for their journey through the dangerous streets. Who goes home? The few Members who had stayed for the Adjournment Motion hurried past to catch their trains. The Smoking Room was empty. The annunciator no longer rattled. Erskine walked slowly towards the Central Lobby, now caverned in darkness except for a small desk light near the Post Office. The constituents were gone for the night. The visitors had drifted away. The policemen no longer guarded the barrier. Who goes home. The Parliamentary day was over. A cleaner had already begun work on the mosaic floor.

Erskine walked on through the abandoned Lobby, through St. Stephen's Hall and the cathedral silence of Westminster Hall. He had seen the coffin of a king, be-candled, waiting in state in the centre of that Hall to be carried home. Who goes home? He pushed open the heavy doors of the entrance, and stood for a moment looking up to the clock tower. The light had gone out. The time was twenty to eleven.

"Cab, sir?" the policeman asked.

"No thank you, Joe," said Erskine. "It's a pleasant night. I think I'll walk."

The policeman saluted.

"Glad to see you back, sir," he said. "If you don't mind me saying so, there was talk you wouldn't be back."

Erskine smiled.

"Thank you, Joe. It was kind of you to regret it."

WHO GOES HOME

He hurried away in the direction of the park without turning his head.

Lord Huberton at this time was sitting in his study composing a new week-end party. So far he had only written two names—George Morgan and Madeleine Pembury. From the glistening writing-paper, topped with a red coronet, the names seemed final in their elaborate calligraphy with its curling ligatures and foliate decorations. On a paper palette, Huberton tested his pen in tapering strokes, murmuring to himself a jingle.

"The Temple of Persephone
Heard a lover's euphony . . ."

"Poor Helen!" he said aloud. "Poor Jane!"

Medor, at his feet, growled faintly at the sound of his voice, and yawned, stretching his dark fangs. Huberton reached out his hand, and felt with pleasure the short hair of the Boxer pricking his finger-tips. It was a good beginning for a week-end, but who else? "Was it Helen, was it Spencer? Was it Erskine . . . ?" Poor Erskine!

Huberton suddenly became tired of writing. He listened to the carillon from the Chinese clock, and counted the hours. They sounded clearly through the silent house. "They disappear with melodious twangs like apparitions," he said to himself in a loud voice. Then he looked through the window at the dark, motionless, lonely outline of the hills. The dog raised its black muzzle inquiringly.

"Poor Erskine!" Huberton said again. "Poor Jane. Poor Helen. Poor all of us. Come on, Medor. Bed!"

He limped to the door, and the dog lurched nappily behind him.

